HEROES of the SOVIET UNION

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By MAURICE MOISEIWITSCH

FOREWORD

Hero of the Soviet Union is the highest Russian award and corresponds with the British V.C. or the American Congressional Medal. In the main this book deals with the winning of this award by Soviet artillerymen, tankmen, airmen, soldiers and sailors, guerrillas and shock workers in the battles before Moscow, before Odessa, Leningrad, Sebastopol, Stalingrad. The greatest Russian campaigns are the setting for the acts of valour, resourcefulness, fortitude and inspiration of the fighting men of the Red army. In the spine-chilling wastes of the North, in the marshy swamps of the Pripet, in the rolling cornfields of the Ukraine, in the snowbound heights of the Causasus, beside the rushing Spring torrents of the Sozh or the "quiet Don", the almost legendary deeds of famous Russian heroes—Shestakovich, the fighter ace; Pavlichenko, the woman sniper; Morozov, artilleryman; Ibarruri, machine gunner and others representative of all Russian arms in the greatest clash in military history, make fascinating reading.

Compiled from front line despatches and other authentic documents and illustrated by actual battle photographs, the author, a Russian himself, has written some graphic accounts of these unique deeds with that powerful and concise pen that readers of his war books, "Bring Me My Bow", and "Woolf Sarason" have admired so much.

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By
MAURICE MOISEIWITSCH.

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THE FACE OF A RED ARMIST
Hero of the Soviet Union, Senior Capt. Anti-Tank Artillery,
who destroyed ten German Tanks.

COSSACK GUERRILLAS

The guerrillas or partisans represent in a sense the Soviet's secret weapon in this war. The Germans had become over confident in success. The Nazis really believed that as soon as a piece of territory was encircled it automatically became liquidated as though by drawing a magic ring and announcing abracadabra Russian forces vanished in thin air.

The Soviets were unusually keen students of the military events in Poland and France. They expected a withdrawal in the first stages of the war but the retreat of industry to the Urals surprised the Nazis. Their provision for the equipping and supporting of independent forces cut off from the main base of supply surprised the Nazis no less.

The Soviet machine was like some gigantic clock into which each part fitted. The Russians left stores, food supplies, equipment of every description in woods, and in caves they left weapons of a special nature, dynamite for the blowing up of railway trains and ammunition dumps, light automatic weapons for handy use against small parties of Nazis, firebottles and grenades against tanks and armoured cars, highpowered rifles with telescopic sights for concealed Red snipers, radios with special shortwave transmission, large scale maps which documented every detail of terrain, vitamin tablets for a man to travel light and sustain himself independently for days at a time.

The Germans used to announce so many square miles captured. At home the German newspapers published large maps shading in territory and making plausible additions of land and industries seized. They underestimated scorched earth and partisans that reduced their gains to the conquest of flies 'capturing so many yards of flypaper'.

A German soldier at the Russian front received a lengthy circular from a building firm offering him a home. Not in Leipzig but 'in the fertile Kursk region, with Southern exposure.' The soldier had his lebensraum, six feet long and eighteen inches wide with a sprinkling of top soil. It

was the fault of his hostile neighbours in the Kursk region.

* * *

There are four brothers, Cossacks, in the Kuban area, who have made themselves a great name as guerrillas. For fear of reprisal to their families their names have to be withheld. They are taciturn powerful men. One of them whom we shall call Nikolai, a keen mighty handed expert with the sabre has accounted for more than a dozen Germans. He is a specialist in the art of silent killing. It is his task to seek out the Germans, cut down their sentries before they can utter a sound. The Cossack sabre is a dreadful instrument of justice and retribution in his hand. There is Piotr, the brains of the detachment, with sloe black eyes and a dry wit who plans the expeditions. He can be relied on to ferret out every movement of a Nazi division, to supply invaluable information to the Soviet intelligence. He leads the expeditions that terrorise German patrols. He plans the derailing of ammunition trains, the dynamiting of power plants, the destruction of stores and equipment. There are the two younger brothers, Semyon and Anton, hard, ruthless hunters of Nazis.

Their escapades have built a sort of legend round them. Anton for instance made his escape into the woods by throwing pepper into the eyes of his German captors. That same night the brothers returned to avenge the death of some villagers.

It was a deep moonless night and they blackened their faces and hands. About half a mile from the enemy camp they tethered their horses. Creeping towards a sentry on hands and knees, Nikolai stalked his prey for half an hour. He leaped up and the brothers saw the sabre describe a complete circle of flame in the firelight, heard the sharp whistle of the blade. The Nazi was caught in Nikolai's arms to prevent the sound of his body falling. His head rolled like a watermelon.

The four of them advanced quietly through the Nazi lines until they came to the village. They knocked loudly on the door of a house that stood at the corner of the main street. A sleepy German sentry thrust his head out. Nikolai clasped his neck in the crook of his elbow and broke it with one vicious twisting movement. The Nazi fell like a sack of potatoes. The brothers were in the house in a twinkling. Two of them rushed upstairs whilst the other two flung open the doors on the ground floor.

There were four German officers sitting over vodka and hors d'oeuvre in the front room. One of them was in the act of transferring a piece of herring on toast into his mouth. He was a notorious sadist who had amused himself by torturing the womenfolk of the village. He saw the other three officers riddled with bullets whilst he choked and choked, purple in the face, over his choice bit of toast and herring.

Nikolai waited with a broad grin for him to recover his breath. Anton clapped him heartily on the back; he was almost dying with fright. Anton swears that such was his terror that it would have killed him but the brothers could not afford to wait.

"Is that the man, Anton?" asked Nikolai.

"Yes, brother. It is he. Although he seemed to be quite a different man this afternoon."

In the old days when a peasant caught a thief he would belabour him with a cudgel crying, 'This is for the chicken, this for the horse, this for setting fire to the barn, you rogue."

The brothers were more up to date but the sentiment was the same.

Anton gave him a blow between the eyes, "This is for robbery, this is for burning, this is for torturing," following up with a couple of back handed slaps across his mouth. "And this—" it was a blow that broke his jawbone, "is for Stalin."

Nikolai pushed him aside, grumbling, "Wait, brother." He drove his sabre into the sadist's throat. "This is for me."

Upstairs there came the sound of a violent explosion. Semyon had found the local quisling hiding under the bed. He had had no time for hide and seek. He tossed a couple of grenades into the room and closed the door, flinging himself down on his face.

They ran outside. The alarm was sounded and they parted, following their way by wide detours to their rendezvous where their horses had been tethered.

Hardly a week went by without the brothers making some contribution to the toll of enemy lives.

One of their most famous exploits was the blasting and burning of a group of petrol lorries that were hidden in a wood near one of the villages. The Red Army was advancing at the time and keeping up a powerful air bombardment. The Nazis had to hide their supplies and equipment from

the aircraft. Much of this was hidden in the woods.

The brothers, who had their contacts in every village in the region, were informed of this.

"A few thousand gallons of petrol means a squadron of enemy tanks stranded, comrades," said Piotr. "Which also means that our advancing forces can capture these tanks. This will double the value of destruction."

Semyon nodded at such sound sense.

No-one said another word. The brothers were chary of words.

That night they made their way in the familiar fashion, their faces blackened, armed with revolvers—which included some excellent Mauser pistols—grenades, dynamite and sabres. There was still an hour or so to wait for the opportune moment.

Piotr unhooked the short wave radio set and tuned in to the local air squadron. He was soon conversing in code with the commander. The latter seemed particularly interested at the information supplied him.

They waited nearly an hour and then quietly made their way into the woods. The lorries were very heavily guarded but they could make their way, little by little, in the forest darkness, until they were within striking distance. The operation was too important to be abandoned even if only one of them could get through.

About half a mile from the German camp they separated and moving soundlessly from tree to tree, picked their way stealthily forward.

Semyon was the lucky one on this occasion. He got within a hundred yards of his goal before he was spotted. He ran straight into a party of four Nazi sentries. He lay flat on his face for a while. He heard them talking and tramping all about him. Then another sound urged him to take a chance, the sound of aircraft flying swiftly overhead, aircraft that circled the wood ceaselessly.

One of the Nazis was so near that he could almost reach him from where he lay hidden.

He decided to wait two or three minutes longer before trying to break through.

His patience was rewarded. Two of the Nazis walked away to continue their patrol nearby. As soon as their footsteps died down Semyon was on his feet, leaping at the nearest sentry. He threw him flat on the ground and instantly turned to the other. He struck hard with the butt

of his rifle but the steel helmet absorbed the blow. Semyon stunned him with a powerful blow on the jaw and then turned to the other who was recovering his breath and crying out.

Semyon heard footsteps. He had no time to lose. Nor could he afford to let a chance like this slip by. He fired his revolver twice and saw both Nazis writhing on the ground.

He turned and ran back into the woods.

But this move was a blind. He doubled back on his tracks, found a thick clump of trees to hide in and lay, awaiting events. The Nazis soon passed him, not troubling to beat the ground as they were convinced that their quarry was endeavouring to escape.

Semyon rose. Within two minutes he was right in the heart of the camp.

He could see the petrol lorries huddled together. They were guarded of course, but were not proof against fire from point blank range.

Semyon lay on his stomach and pulled three grenades from his belt. These he lay side by side. Unhurriedly he trained his automatic on the group of sentries, pressed the trigger. The sudden crash of the rifle from a few yards range created panic. He saw three fall, the others scattered, firing wildly.

He pulled the pins of the grenades out with his teeth and aimed carefully. The first grenade exploded under the belly of a lorry and tore a great hole in the tank. The second misfired. The third flung another lorry on its side.

Semyon set a match to a petrol soaked piece of sacking wrapped round a stone, hurled it accurately and waited long enough to see the enormous tongues of green flame shoot up. He swiftly withdrew into the woods.

He made a wide detour, escaping the cordon flung round the camp by the swiftness of his movements.

In different parts of the forest the brothers lay, listening with satisfaction to the deadly hum of the aircraft that now swarmed round their brilliantly illuminated target like wasps round a jampot.

All that night a rain of incendiary bombs and explosives smashed up the Nazi supplies of petrol, equipment, food and other stores.

"You see, comrades," said Piotr to them later, "It's not the strength of a few men that they fear. It's the fear of

shadows, of night, of their guilty conscience. These are the things that give us strength and these are the things that will settle their accounts."

* * *

The partisans learn to think quickly. They are masters of improvisation.

The following is a story that is told about the brothers by their friends in the Kuban.

One of the brothers was acting as scout ahead of the others when he ran right into a German patrol that had turned a corner of the road. It was broad daylight. Escape was impossible. Single-handed he could do nothing against them. It was a reversal of roles, the trapper ensnared.

Quite quietly he waited for the Germans who were as surprised to see him as he was.

Had he tried to turn and run, to take cover, he would have been struck down immediately. The very casualness of his attitude partly disarmed the Germans.

They had their rifles ready immediately and three were trained at his breast.

With a casual gesture he beckoned them. Slowly they approached, warily as though he were a booby trap. It was only when they had formed a ring round him did they lower their rifles.

They were silent, on tenterhooks, waiting for him to speak.

Suddenly he dropped flat on his face, shouting, "Brothers, shoot!"

Not one of the Germans survived the volley that rang from the bushes behind them.

X FIGHTER SQUADRON

At the height of the battle for Odessa which, with Sebastopol and Tobruk, ranks as one of the historic sieges of the war, a fighter squadron, using one of the city squares as its landing ground, tested the tactics and strategy of the Soviet Fighter Command. Odessa was the crucible which forged the broad pattern of the tactics of Russian air aces. During this battle X Fighter Squadron fought six hundred engagements and destroyed over ninety enemy machines.

Somewhere the inexperienced soldiers learn the measure of their foe, learn to understand their technique; a time comes when the battle trained Luftwaffe pilots can no longer spring surprises. Odessa proved to be that testing ground. Here Heroes of the Soviet Union, Shestakov and Baranov, amongst other became virtuosi in a matter of days. You have to think quickly in the air. You learn quickly too or perish.

At the time Shestakov and his comrades were assigned the task of supporting their infantry. Hemmed in so that they were forced right into the confines of the city, to use one of its squares as an airfield, they set out every day against great odds to beat back the Luftwaffe. Their prowess may well be compared with the other 'few'.

One of Shestakov's earliest flights convinced him of the necessity to balance wit as well as technique against the foe. The task of each flier was to disorganise the battle formations of the attackers. The Nazis would send over large formations to bomb and strafe the infantry; other units would detach themselves from the main groups and pin down the Soviet fighter aircraft.

Shestakov's first and second flights taught him much. He learned a great deal of the tricks employed by pilots schooled in France and the Battle of Britain. He learned the lesson of avoiding decoys sent out temptingly to tie up one or more Soviet machines whilst a Nazi squadron lay in wait to dive out of the sun. Nor was he to be deterred by the fear of mere numbers. There is room in the sky to manoeuvre

almost without limit. He would ignore smaller units vainly seeking to pin him down whilst the bombers were free to play havoc at low altitude with the Soviet defence. Climbing high until the oxygen mask flapped stickily on his face and its sweetish fumes made him lightheaded he would press on at a whirlwind pace to seek out the main battle formations.

There below him was a bomber squadron guarded by two layers of fighters, a squadron ready to saturate the Red artillery with a massive bombardment. He would nose down gently and then boost his engine to full throttle. The small specks, like toys, would loom large at the progress of his descent at a vertical gradient—marked by the screaming wind and the trembling of the machine.

It would be tempting to pick off first one aircraft and then another before they were fully aware of his presence. But that would mean an attack from the rear. Far more dangerous to follow the path he chose, a direct attack in their midst. The chances of escape would be slight, but he would be able to break up the organised attack, delay it for several minutes perhaps thus giving a chance for others to join him in disintegrating the formation finally.

Dropping like a projectile he plunged through the first and second layers of fighters, easing out of his dive when almost at the level of the bombers. Like a wolf bursting through the defence of sheep dogs to tear the throats of the flock he drove his machine relentlessly into the midst of the bombers. A large Heinkel swayed before him. He caught it for a moment over open sights and pressed the gunbutton. The dynamism of his guns made his aircraft vibrate. Steel and fire ploughed into the dark belly of the Heinkel, tearing away pieces of wing, smashing into the fuselage. He had no time to see what happened to it. The air resounding with the roar of swarming aircraft, was shattered with the crash of machine gun and cannon fire. He banked steeply, pulled back the control column and went off into a tight roll to fall athwart the bombers once again.

The Nazis would be embarrassed by their very wealth of numbers. Afraid to fire freely for fear of hurting their own, they made vain assaults to beat him out of the sky. He almost crashed head on into a bomber mainly preoccupied with avoiding him.

All around him the diving, banking aircraft swung in fury. Feverish efforts on the parts of the squadron leaders to regroup their forces were unavailing. The machines turned

and spun, co-ordination broken. A couple of Messerschmitts coming in to engage him held their fire when he sat on the tail of a Heinkel. They were afraid of overshooting their mark.

Now, out of the sun, came three of his comrades, power-diving directly into the main body of the Nazi formation. It was the final disorganising blow.

The dog fights that followed lasted for many minutes and ranged over scores of miles. The broad distances covered in such running fights made it impossible to retain contact with formations. In a few seconds you would be alone in the sky with your opponent and, your main task completed, could engage him at your leisure.

Many months later this same squadron participated in the greatest of all Soviet battles, Stalingrad, when its task was the escorting of bombers and tank busters. A small group of fighters, every man a veteran, would fly ahead and above, intercepting Me.s and F.W.s. They terrorised the Germans, these tough fliers. Not a single bomber was lost during the whole engagement, such was the remarkable ability of Shestakov's men.

Shestakov, Baranov, Martynov, Serogodsky and Korolev are the Soviet counterparts of Malan, Buerling, Finucane and other British aces. There is the same extraordinary ability to balance brain and eye, nerve and muscle, gauge speeds and distances with lightning rapidity and uncanny accuracy, the same combination of tremendous discipline and sensitiveness of control which makes the fighter pilot as great an artist in the handling of his aircraft as a musician with his instrument. They are a temperamental lot, the necessity for rapid response to a variety of unexpected situations give a zest to their reactions and yet there must not be a nerve in their whole bodies. Shestakov himself has in addition an intelligence of a high order and his men—and countless millions in the Soviet Union—regard him with the affection and admiration that has characterised the feeling for the most romantic type of soldier, the fighter pilot.

At present the main task of Shestakov's men is known as 'free flight', a task for which the best pilots are carefully trained. They no longer co-ordinate their operations with the army, support infantry or tanks. The work is independent and confined mainly to the seeking out of enemy air strength by individual flights or flights in small groups. They are hunters par excellence. Individual skill here is of

primary importance. Each flier is an ace.

One of the favourite German tactics is to dispatch some of their aces over a Soviet aerodrome and endeavour to prevent the Soviet pilots from taking off. They lie in wait in a cloud bank, or hover over their target out of reach of the anti-aircraft, ready to swoop as soon as the Russians endeavour to leave the ground.

This tactic was used against the new independent free flight aerodrome with disastrous results for the Nazis. They sent over four of their finest pilots to greet their new visitors.

Shestakov dispatched a couple of his best men who wheeled up skilfully with that weaving flight that so favoured defence. As soon as the Nazis engaged them they realised that here were men of a different mettle from the common run of fliers. They manipulated their machines with a verve and precision that confused the Nazis.

The Nazis swooped, the Soviet pilots, after presenting a weaving flight, looped in a tight circle and sent off a stream of fire with an accuracy that badly shook the Nazis. All four engaged the two Red pilots. The Nazis pulled up their machines in an effort to gain altitude at a superior pace. This was the tactic strongly favoured by all fighter pilots. The dominating position is the superior position. The struggle for supremacy is a struggle for heights. Here you can use the sun and superior speed in attack. In a few minutes the struggle took both Nazi and Soviet machines from two to twelve thousand feet altitude. Now here the Nazis could bank and dive at a five hundred miles an hour onrush of speed against the Soviet machines. The tactic of domination, the tactic of conveyor-projectile was nullified by the rapidity of the Soviet ascent.

Twelve thousand feet up the Red pilots manoeuvred skilfully for position, a flick roll and a burst of deflection fire sending one Nazi pilot off into a drunken spin, black smoke pouring from his fuselage. He caught a wind current and after wrestling with wind and fire for a while managed to overcome the danger.

Whilst they were thus occupied Shestakov sent up two more machines which, unnoticed by the Nazis, climbed to about fifteen thousand feet where they stalked their opponents for a while, then choosing a favourable moment, dived down. Catching the Nazis off balance a moment they plucked one Me. out of the sky in a matter of seconds. The others scattered and hared for home.

This opening combat set the key to the whole campaign. Within a week the new air unit had destroyed thirty Nazi machines and dominated the whole sector.

The effect of this was that the initiative passed into the hands of the Soviets.

In single, in pairs or in formations of four, the Red pilots daily went out to hunt, sometimes engaging stray aircraft or formations, sometimes assailing large formations with special tasks of supporting German army operations, sometimes answering calls for assistance from land troops. Special agents at large they responded to every task, adapting themselves with the skill of virtuoso to every paramount need of the front, they met the Nazi forces wherever they threatened and broke up their attack and routed them.

* * *

A large bomber force is dive bombing a group of isolated infantry, desperately clinging to the bank of the river. The bombers circle and circle endlessly, diving to release their loads from low altitudes. The attack is methodical. A creeping tide of fire searches out the Russian force. Anti aircraft is being subjected to special bombardment. Now a group of Nazi fighters join forces to hedge hop at terrific speed, sending a burst of lead into the soldiers. Strafing is one of the most insidious of all attacks.

The soldiers lie flat on their faces, unable to lift their heads as the fighters sweep above them.

This has been going on for nearly an hour and their time is short. They are doomed men.

Then out of the sky appears a new figure, a tiny fighter, hovering and wheeling. Ours or theirs?

As it dives low they recognise a Yak fighter, trim and short-winged. First one bomber breaks up in the air with a tremendous éclat, black smoke and pieces of fire-consumed fabric scattered for hundreds of yards around. It dives again and the tracer bullets can be seen like a blazing necklace, fantastic and very pretty, linking up with a Me. The latter is damaged and turns to break off the engagement whilst the Red machine hovers once more to see where to strike with most advantage.

The men who lie hugging the ground, unable to lift their heads, pray and marvel that this tiny machine can do so much.

For a while it circles and directs desultory fire at first one and then another machine. These, stung to make a

reply, turn from their bombing and drive forward to meet it. It breaks away from them and heels over in a terrific vertical dive. It aims itself like a bullet at a fighter that has been strafing their lines. It screams down until collision seems inevitable. Then, just as the men catch their breath in anticipation of the fatal crash, the pilot eases his machine almost by imperceptible stages and brushes over the head of the Nazi giving him a quick two second burst of cannon fire.

There are now four machines broken off from the formation and it is now clear what the Red pilot is up to. By using speed, by making precipitous attacks and breaking away, he succeeds in distracting the enemy machines from the primary task of wiping out the Russian infantry.

Four, then six, now eight machines are stung into action by a series of these lightning assaults, these mosquito bites. The Russian soldiers can breathe, can lift their heads, can hurry to the river and make a desperate bid to rejoin their forces.

And the Red pilot? He turns now to his second task: the destruction of the maximum number of German aircraft. He has already accounted for one bomber. He now turns his attention to one of the strafing fighters.

No hesitancy now. He makes a head on attack. It is the Nazi who has to flinch. They dive to meet one another at six hundred miles an hour. It is a contest of wills. The one whose nerve fails him, who flinches from the remorseless meeting will lose the initiative. As the Nazi turns aside he presents a target to the Red pilot who slashes him down the length of his body as though with a fine knife.

The Nazi bursts into flame like a torch and before he falls the Soviet pilot has banked steeply to retain height and meet the next threat. He has to run the gauntlet of enemy fire. The Nazis have grouped themselves in some sort of order to frustrate this menace. He can no longer attack individual machines. A phalanx of machines concentrating a fire-power of thirty guns makes an irresistible destructive force. He climbs for cover with the enemy in hot pursuit, but as he gets out of the cloud-bank, his eyes watering with the blinding sun, he hears the roar of engines. Great shadows race across the clouds as the machines dive down, crossing his path with the snarling roar of motors driven to extreme pitch. Before he can recognize friend or foe they have shot past him and he hears the fury of awakened guns.

The pursuing Nazis have run head-on into a squadron of X Fighter Squadron. They have run head-on into smashing defeat.

Through the cloud-bank and under the noses of the Soviet machines, they are point-blank targets. It is the old primitive test of warfare, survival for those quickest on the draw, and the Nazis are no match for Shestakov's men. There comes a series of explosions, high and low like a firecracker in a powder-room. Sounds like the tearing of calico, sounds like the exhaust of a racing-car driven beyond its capacity, and all the paraphernalia of accompanying firework displays, tracer-shells like high voltage sparks, the green flame of blazing petrol, clouds of yellow sparks, the reddish fire of burning vulcanite and fabric.

He rejoins the squadron. Within five minutes the ragtag of the Nazi machines are limping home as fast as their overstrained engines can take them.

The pilot has completed full circle. In that engagement was the pattern of the whole strategy of the Soviet fighter force: the breaking-up of the enemy attack, the destruction of the maximum number of enemy machines, the wresting of air supremacy.

EPISODE THREE

ALLY

Ruben Ibarruri, Pasionaria's son, fighter in the Spanish War, order-bearer, commander of machine gun company in the Soviet-German war died a hero's death. He was only twenty-one. His mother said, "Better to die standing than to live on your knees", and from the platform of the first Anti-Fascist youth meeting held in the House of Trade Unions, Ruben had said, "There is no time for deliberation and hesitation. Millions of victims of the Nazi murderers cry out for vengeance. The voice of death resounds throughout Europe. The ashes of Warsaw, the ruins of Belgrade, the dead of Rotterdam, the empty villages of Greece call for vengeance.

"I am a Spaniard. Russian and Georgian, Byeolrussian and Kazakh, Ukrainian and Tadjik fight by my side. Take your places with us, all you who want happiness and freedom! There are many of us today in the firing line. Tomorrow our number will be still greater, for our friends everywhere will join us."

He was a worthy ally of a country that has all the fire and vigour of a new ideal. Ruben was a Basque and a true representative of that passionate, courageous race that opposed the German and Italian forces who fought Franco's war. The intensity of his hatred for Fascism was as pure as a flame. He was like the personification of youth opposing tyrannical forces; dark, good-looking, with direct and fiery eyes.

* * *

The machine-gun company holds the hill. Their job is both difficult and delicate. Powerful forces are opposed to them, far superior to their own. Units of a tank column with mobile artillery and dive bombers are moving forward to blast a way through for the infantry. In earlier campaigns, in other lands the sight of such superior forces had been enough to compel a rapid capitulation. The tanks and the dive-bombers would fire and bombard the position, break through on the flanks and complete the encirclement. As soon as the machine gunners found themselves isolated, lost the comforting support of their main base under which they sheltered, they considered themselves lost and surrendered. The Nazis, fanning out behind the lines, reigned supreme in the terror of a disintegrating attack. Soldiers without their officers, officers without their orders, generals without contact with the main body of their men . . . it was enough to reduce a powerful army to a helpless body like an octopus whose tentacles are rendered impotent after the destruction of its nervous system. Yes, the machine-gunners gave themselves up, often enough to a couple of German cyclists—gave themselves up when they had thousands of rounds of ammunition.

The Russians had long countered this tactic of disintegration. The machine-gunners lay down in their dugouts, their weapons silent. The thunder of the iron treads of the German tanks rose to its crescendo, the machine-gunners remained motionless. Everything was quiet on the Russian battlefield, too quiet for the Germans. The machine-gunners could plainly see the tanks so cumbersome-looking

SOVIET TOMMY GUNNERS AT THE READY

and yet so agile, approaching to within point-blank fire. This was the beginning of the nervous agony. The tanks—heavies that mounted hundred and fifty millimetre cannons or threw fifty feet thongs of flame, descended on them. Now the machine-gunners' dugouts were like iron sounding-boxes whilst the tanks roared overhead. The machine-gunners lay beside their guns, frail as tin openers faced with the safe of a bank vault, whilst the machines of the power of tens of thousands of horses roared above them. The overpowering din stunned and paralysed the senses. But the tank men driving blindly onwards held their enormous destructive energy in leash. It is true that as the last tanks passed a few daring souls would jump out of their well-camouflaged dugouts and metaphorically spit at the departing foe, helping them on their way with a shower of grenades and fire bottles that clung insidiously like leeches to their armour; but most of the machine-gunners wiped the perspiration from their lips and reached for a cigarette—after their ordeal, and left the tanks to face a foe worthy of their calibre, the Stormovik tank-busters and the artillery extermination unit.

The machine-gunners now waited for the infantry.

Ruben, senior lieutenant of this machine-gun company, had his binoculars to his eyes. In the distance the tall corn swayed and then flattened under the tramp of boots. The first grey uniforms appeared. Tommy-gunners, half crouching, nursing their light automatic weapons—ugly with their fore-shortened barrels, but devastating at close quarters—units of mortar gunners ready to form their sinister ensemble at a second's notice, and infantry, with bayonets fixed, one hand nervously feeling for their belts, ready to unpin the hand grenade.

They advanced, then halted whilst the line reshuffled and straightened; moved forward again. A series of such nervous and convulsive movements brought them steadily nearer. Ruben gave the word to his men. The first rounds clicked home in their sockets, the machine-gunners crouched over their weapons. As the line advanced within range, Ruben saw through his binoculars the cornfield stir again which, on this windless day, reminded him of the movements of rats gorging themselves on the ripe grain. A second wave of infantry was advancing in support and behind that no doubt another wave and then another, like the sea with its endless tides beating remorselessly against the little island

of rocks. The machine-gunner's practised hands gave release to the tension by easing the sights and controls of their slick weapons. The first line was well within range and in a minute or two the second line too would be within the radius of fire.

Ruben had to adapt himself to a double attack. They could deal with the first line well enough but whilst so engaged it was quite likely that the second line would swamp them with a flank movement. He ordered a handful of picked gunners to be ready to concentrate fire on the first line. The main force of his unit was to deal with the second line simultaneously.

It required tremendous nervous control to withhold fire whilst the first line moved to within a few yards. The mortar gunners and the grenadiers could do great damage at such close quarters. Ruben detailed a special unit to pick off snipers and grenadiers. Coolly and skilfully he marshalled his defences.

As the infantry crept forward into the mouths of the guns the tension turned everyone pale. A sergeant-gunner said, "They'll swamp us in a minute, comrade commander."

"Don't get trigger-conscious, there's plenty of time."

It was a hair-raising tactic to attempt to deal with both lines at once, but Ruben knew that their only chance was to catch them before they had time to deploy.

They could plainly see the embellishments on the officers' uniforms.

Ruben looked inquiringly at a gunner who was sighting the second line. He shook his head.

For a moment Ruben hesitated. To wait any longer would be disastrous. Their little outpost would be over-run, smothered with fire at such short range if the first line were allowed to get any closer. Many of these men were far older than he, good soldiers too, who had seen enough action to earn the description of veterans. Their anxious looks were an intimidating reproach. He steeled himself to remain calm. As the hardened soldiers looked at him he smiled confidently whilst a pulse was hammering in his forehead. He must not falter, show any of his fear of failure. The battle-toughened gunners, seeing this youngster's confident smile were calm. They winked and grinned at one another.

"We're preparing a nice stew for you, Jerry. Come and get it!"

"Comrade commander!"

Ruben looked up sharply. He knew what was coming. "They're in—"

Before he could tell Ruben the second line was in range, the latter had already uttered the one word "Fire!" Three machine guns cried out bitterly their repetitive song of destruction. Ten others followed immediately.

The first line simply wilted away under this terrible torrent. They were caught completely by surprise at a range of about sixty yards. The infantry hadn't time to unpin their grenades. Men fell in swarms. Figures crouching flat on their faces fumbled for their belts suddenly froze into stillness. Mortar crews were cut to pieces in a huddled mass. Hardly a shot was returned. This deadly execution of the first line, caught with breath-taking surprise, was almost immediate.

The second line, also within clear range had no time to scatter and manoeuvre. The machine guns made a broad sweep, cleaving the ranks with thousands of bullets. The line wavered and broke. Each machine gun was allotted a section of the enemy line and each traversed his territory with fire. One ace marksman picked out any individual movement; here and there a soldier would be caught a few yards ahead of the others, caught in mid-stride and cut down with his hand poised to fling a grenade.

The unloosed savagery of the guns proved too much for the nerves of the Germans. A few pressed forward boldly but many more scattered and made for cover. Those that had gone forward advanced a few yards and expired before they had a chance to get to grips.

"Forward!"

As the mass of the Germans turned the machine gunners leaped from cover and swept forward stumbling over the dead bodies of the Germans strewn in their path. They kept up a sporadic fire after the retreating enemy. Ruben, running ahead of his men, pressed forward exultantly. He saw them discard anything that might impede their retreat. Mortars, heavy machine guns, even rifles.

Beyond that field and the next a village was used as a springboard for the attack. The machine gunners burst into the liberated village picking off the enemy out of every one of their hiding-places like an expert chef scooping out oysters from their shells. Here and there the Germans would pause at a corner and fling a grenade in desperation. The machine gunners and the light automatic riflemen who supported

them, darted into doorways shooting from the hip. Fire flashed from street to street.

Ruben who took in the layout of the village shouted to one unit to make for a row of cottages at full speed. A body of Germans drove head-on into an ambush. Scores of others were driven with calculated fire into a blind alley where they made a last stand. Neither side asked for quarter. The duel raged a few minutes only and the last German was blown up with a grenade that fell from his own nerveless hand.

"Forward!"

* * *

It was a fitting battle-cry and the last word that many of his comrades heard him utter. Ruben Ibarruri was killed by a stray bullet. His comrades swept forward even more impetuously to avenge his death.

"Better to die standing than live on your knees."

The son of Pasionaria died standing.

EPISODE FOUR

GOD OF WAR

The Russians call artillery the god of war.

Artillery battered the German armoured divisions to impotence before Smolensk, artillery crushed and routed the German mobile armour before Moscow, artillery pulverised the German forces before Leningrad, finally artillery blasted a path through for the Russian three hundred mile advance from Stalingrad.

Artillery was the chief Russian weapon of defence and attack. The new Russian rocket gun nicknamed Katusha by the Germans is the deadliest in the world. The stoicism and patience, the ability to endure unto death, the remorseless

fortitude of the Russians has made artillery a weapon of peculiar power in their hands. The rock-like persistence to hold firm against the severest onslaught has characterised much of their strategy and the field pieces, the anti-tank gun, the siege gun and "Katusha" is the material of this strategy.

Much has been said about Russian stoicism, but although the gun seems a stolid weapon compared with the dynamic air force or the volatile tank squadron, there is a surprising strategic subtlety in its use in Soviet hands.

* * *

The new gunners looked up as the dive bombers roared overhead, the old hands hardly paid any attention. When the fire drew nearer and the whistling bombs grew quite close they got to their feet reluctantly. Some of them had hardly slept for forty-eight hours. Their job had been to hold on. After a time you no longer take any notice of danger.

Morozov one of the oldest members of the crew had wondered at one time what it would be like under bombardment. Now he was more concerned with whether there would be any sugar with the tea ration.

"Hey, Morozov," said the battery commander, "Get cracking. Let's see what you can do."

He eyed the gunner with rough affection. He knew what he was capable of.

"Up to their tricks again," grumbled Morozov. "Another squadron." He shook his head. It was going to be a long job.

He slapped the snout of the gun and got busy.

He propelled it up with an almost careless gesture, the great piece of mechanism was as light as a revolver in his hand.

He was an expert on deflection fire. The crew, particularly the new members watched him at work as he stabbed the sky with a powerful detonation. Shrapnel burst under the noses of the leading bombers.

The crew swung into action, bringing up shells, ramming them into the insatiable belly of the gun. Morozov grumbled, "I always wanted the cavalry, to handle a sabre, something light and delicate. There's no real subtlety in this job." He pulled a face, mimicing the deep bay of his gun. The shell screamed, the gun recoiled, the young birch trees

trembled and swayed.

"Well, you couldn't do that with a sabre," said the battery commander as they watched the first bomber go off into a tearing cacophonous outcry, its engine degutted, its wings blasted clean off. "Dear, dear," said Morozov, "Like a plucked chicken."

He smiled slightly, looking sideways at the new members of the crew. A bit later he was grumbling as before.

But that day the Germans were driven to desperation by the doggedness of the Russian gunners. They dive-bombed the positions hour after hour until the whole battle area was churned up by the ravaging fire and dust clouds hung on the hot air. From the air they watched the bomb-bursts open like flowers. They could see nothing of the shrapnel, the pieces of bone and drops of blood commingled with the dirt, the wreck of machines, the broken bodies.

* * *

"Comrade commander. Hey, comrade commander. Can you hear me?" Morozov, his face covered with dirt, his eyes heavy with the pain throbbing in his head, his uniform almost torn to tatters on his back, scrabbled feverishly in the dirt.

The commander's face alone was recognisable, pale and rather young looking in death, much younger than he remembered.

Morozov crawled over to the others. He looked at them and swore in his heart. Then, with fierce resolution he turned to his gun. Somehow it had avoided damage under that almost direct hit. The air still throbbed with the droning of the aircraft. One machine dived very low and then departed, the pilot apparently satisfied that the whole battery had been wiped out.

Morozov shook his head to clear it from the echo of the blasting bomb still sounding in his ears, wiped the sweat and grime from his eyes and circumspectly began to make his preparations.

Some little way off was the store of shells for the gun. Doing the work of an entire crew he collected the shells, dragging them to the foot of the gun. He loaded it and tested the controls. To his delight the mechanism was in perfect order. His hands trembled with delight. What a surprise lay in wait for the Germans!

It took him over an hour to make his preparations, during

which time his arms ached with fatigue and he almost ruptured himself lifting the dead weights of these powerful shells. Finally he was ready. He scattered a little soil on the mangled dead. At length he relaxed and, lighting a cigarette close to the ground he inhaled three times and immediately pinched it out.

Goodbye, comrade commander. Goodbye, observer. Goodbye, range finder, goodbye loaders. Goodbye, comrades all. A little blood and Russian soil. Well, Morozov still has his hands and his eyes and he can recognise the enemy when he sees it.

Morozov waited for the enemy. Almost dead with fatigue and pain he remained to do the work of patrol, of loader, of observer, of the entire crew, waiting for the enemy. Did a quiet voice tell him, Go! What chance have you? This is suicide. You can't do seven men's work. Otherwise, why have seven men? If a quiet voice did reason like that it was promptly dismissed. With heroics? No. With extravagant vows? Not with extravagant vows, either. With the simple exclamation: What, miss this chance of giving the Germans a real surprise!

It was very quiet. He had never before noticed what a desolate place a battlefield can be. How grim and ugly. Even the birds flew by in a strange fashion. In absolute silence. How stark the forest looked, shorn and smashed and blackened, with naked spiky stumps that were once green trees.

The silence was oppressive, sombre. But he did not have long to wait after all.

Familiar specks appeared on the horizon ungainly but rapidly approaching—Tanks.

It was not too late now to beat an honourable retreat after spiking the gun . . . Who would blame him? After all . . . *tanks*! What chance had he? A whole formation was advancing to occupy the position. They could deploy rapidly, encircle him before he could get going. A man has only one pair of hands. A heavy field piece can't be manoeuvred like an automatic rifle.

But Morozov whistled between his teeth.

He found the range . . . about one thousand yards now. Well, that was near enough. The barrel of his gun tilted up, immense and powerful. Its iron voice made the forest shake. A savage recoil. In the distance a little puff of dirt. Just a little beyond range. Try again. He could no

ARTILLERY IS THE GOD OF WAR

longer feel fatigue as he rammed home the next shell. Ah! Got him. He could see well enough. The tank was knocked sideways with a glancing hit.

No time to lose. He swung and lifted the next shell, rammed it home. The gun barked. Again. Swing and lift, your back almost breaking with exertion. Fire! The forest roaring. No. Once again. Spit on your hands. Now try again. This one's for Marshal Voronov . . . But no, missed again. The whole earth trembling, the forest groaning, trees bowing and crashing, spreadeagled beneath the iron treads of the oncoming tanks. No time to lose. His hands shook with fatigue, he had to wipe the sweat continually because it poured into his eyes. Take a hold on yourself! You mustn't miss again . . . Well, well, Morozov, and they told you you could shoot. Aren't you ashamed?

The fifth shell—rammed home, the iron door closed on it. Now. Steady. Take it easy. Quite calm now. Judge the progress of that tank carefully. He's a canny devil, that driver, keeps slowing down, then suddenly increasing speed. Zigzagging, too. Now, Morozov, you are up to all their tricks. Be careful now. Make this one for Uncle Joe himself. There it goes!

Got him! Smack in the gun turret.

Now hurry! Hurry! They're almost on top of you! You mustn't miss now. You can't miss from this range. Speed! There it goes! Ahhhh! A beauty. How merrily he blazes. That's shaken them! Three tanks smashed up in ten minutes. But hurry, *hurry*! Your hands are slippery with sweat, the shell almost slips out of your hand. Get her in! There. Slam shut that iron door on her. Let her go. No. Missed. Again. Their fire is beating all around you now. That was a close one.

If you miss this time it's all over with you, Morozov. They'll be on you like an avalanche of steel. There she goes!

Oh, what a lovely sight! Bull's eye this time. A green torch of flame. Once it was a tank.

But what's this? They're slowing down. Slowing down and *turning*! Victory! They're *routed*! If they only knew how near they were to smothering you. If only they had held out another five minutes!

* * *

Nor was that the end of Morozov's one man stand against

the German armoured forces. They came again at night and Morozov's duel recommenced. But this time he was cooler. This time he was accustomed to the situation. Guided by the gun flashes of the tanks he accounted for three more of them.

He waited for the next move throughout the night. Towards morning he noticed the shadowy forms of men picking their way forward. They were tommy-gunners. He opened a tempestuous fire of shrapnel and the attack broke down.

When relief came they counted seven demolished tanks and the bodies of a hundred or more tommy-gunners scattered over the battlefield.

EPISODE FIVE

UNKNOWN

Whatever the strategy of generals, the courage and skill of soldiers, and the power of industries, the issues of war are finally decided by the spirit of the people. The Russians believe that there is this great difference between the Germans and the Soviets in their will to victory. The Germans are impelled by greed for loot and love of power and conquest. Stalingrad is a strategic point, the Volga a water barrier. To the Russians Stalingrad is toil and blood and history, "the Volga is our mother."

This is a story told by a lieutenant at the height of the Stalingrad battle.

The Germans had gained several important heights dominating the Volga and day in and day out kept the river under bombardment. The defenders of Stalingrad would say, "Not an inch back. There is no land for us East of the Volga."

All night long the German searchlights swept the river for traffic, boats that brought food and reserves and supplies to the defenders of Stalingrad. The night air vibrated with the drone of aircraft, the waters heaved and rolled with the

explosions; enormous blueblack bubbles broke the surface of the river, deadwhite flarelights revealed clearly the outlines of launches and armed vessels. The German guns bellowed.

The young lieutenant had been embarked to take his place amongst the defenders of Stalingrad who, hardpressed, were clinging to the very stones in a last grip on the city. The Germans shouted across the frontline, "Rus! Hey, Rus! Bubble, bubble . . . !" mimicing the antics of a man expiring in the water.

But the defenders remained and a steady stream of reinforcements continued to arrive.

The river boat chugged onwards in the night. It was so dark that the flares gave a ghostly radiance to the scene. The distant fires made a demonic reddish horizon, the very mouth of hell which they were approaching. A searchlight swept the water. The young lieutenant heavily armed, crouched in the bottom of the boat. It came nearer and nearer. A beam of light crossed the boat. The pilot wrestled with the searchlight, forced his little craft to weave and dodge, but the broad beam held them. The searchlight was a powerful hand arresting them, holding them in position.

They had not long to wait. The shore battery quickly found its range. The guns boomed and the first shells began to whistle.

"Full speed ahead," said the captain of the craft and the pilot made a direct line for the opposite bank.

The waters surged and boiled about them, beating violently against the side of the boat; exploding shells shot up fifty feet jets like whip thongs. The little boat, quivering and coughing at full speed, was driving onwards at a spanking pace, its engine ready to burst with its exertions.

A shell burst near the prow and splinters crashed into the side of the ship.

The lieutenant knew it was only a question of a minute or two now. They had still half a mile to go. Heavily armed and clad as he was he could never make the other bank. A hundred yards or so he might manage but half a mile was beyond his strength.

The next shell drove overhead. The Germans had lost the range! Another hundred yards, another . . . He lay in the boat, his teeth clenched. The steady whine of the shell rose to a scream. An avalanche of roaring fury, an explosion

that was like a blow from a rifle butt. The boat overturned, the night and the river became inextricably confused, the powerful eye of the searchlight lit up the faces of men, distorted, their mouths open, fighting for air.

He kicked out with all his force, swam a few strokes, rested only when he had got clear of the beam. These few strokes quite tired him. His uniform and equipment were waterlogged and seemed to weigh a ton. He struck out again. This time he moved forward a good fifty or a hundred yards before he turned over on his back to rest. His arms were like lead, every stroke made agonised pains shoot up his elbows. It was almost pitch dark, water and sky one. He swam desperately towards the red-glowing horizon.

The water closed over him and he fought to regain the surface.

He felt a hand in the darkness.

"Comrade, here—take this life-belt."

Dimly he discerned the form of the speaker. It seemed to be a middle-aged man, a civilian. He was disengaging the lifebelt from his shoulders and trying to force it into the lieutenant's hand.

The lieutenant pushed the hand away contemptuously.

"Look after yourself, comrade," said the young man. "I'll manage."

"You won't. You've been under once. There's still a long way to go. You can make it if you have this."

The lieutenant did not answer. He turned away and kicked out briskly for the Western bank. A minute or two later the other was at his elbow.

"Here take it. I've only got one arm. You'll be of more use on the other side. You're needed."

He thrust the lifebelt into the lieutenant's hand and swam off. In a trice he was lost in the darkness. Unknown . . .

* * *

Klim, a young guerrilla fighter, was stalking a German patrol. It was a highly dangerous operation; they were a mere stone's throw from a farmstead occupied by the Germans. Three Germans were proceeding carefully through the small wood, looking over their shoulders every other minute. Crouching in the bushes he could see them distinctly. He took careful aim and fired his automatic rifle. Two Germans fell writhing, the third fell flat on his face and lay still. Klim hesitated a moment or two, then pushed his steel

hat forward at the end of his rifle. A bullet banged and his hat rotated like a top.

He whipped on his hat and took aim at the prone form of the German soldier, partly hidden by a mound. The bullet knocked off a clump of grass raising a little dust and powdered earth. He fired again. The second time he thought he had hit his man. He could not afford to wait a minute longer.

He slipped off into the wood. He knew the hunt would be on in a moment. There was nowhere to hide beyond the wood. The country was open ground for over a mile.

He decided to hide in the wood. He chose a young oak tree and scaling it quickly he crouched on a broad branch and lay still.

The German soldiers passed that way in a rush. Two, four, six, eight of them. They made a lovely target and his fingers itched for the trigger.

He lay still, hardly breathing.

The sun was low, in another hour or two it would be night. He could wait. Lying absolutely quiet and still in the shadow he watched a bird wheel down and perch on a branch within arm's reach.

Ten minutes, a quarter of an hour went by. Then half an hour . . . There came the sound of footsteps, the German soldiers were returning. Their rifles ready, they beat the shrubbery systematically, staring attentively at every bush, moving rapidly from tree to tree. A few minutes and they were out of sight. He decided to take a chance. He was about to slip down when he heard footsteps, the beating of undergrowth. He lay still, thanking his stars he had not made a move. The Germans were back again.

This time they stayed longer. When they had moved beyond his tree he breathed a sigh of relief and slipped down quickly. They were certain to find him before sunset. He could not stay. Boldly he ran through the wood and made for the fields.

He cleared a stile and raced across the rye field, crouching low. The next field was pastureland. There was no shelter available. The field beyond was empty. He ran boldly and dropped down into a ditch.

A woman with a milk pail passed by and uttered a little cry as she saw him crouching in the ditch. She looked swiftly about her.

"Is it all clear, mother?" whispered the young guerrilla

fighter.

"Lie still, in God's name. They're coming," she whispered in return.

He lay low.

He heard footsteps and then voices. A man said in execrable Russian.

"Did you see him pass by?"

"Whom?" said the woman.

"A young man, you know well enough. Which way did he go?"

"I saw no-one."

"You lie. Listen, Russian. Tell the truth. Do you understand? He was seen leaving the wood. He must have crossed this field. Which way did he go? Be very careful how you answer! If you lie you'll be hanged."

"He went that way," said the woman simply.

"Very well. Take her, sergeant. If she lied we'll have her strung up in an hour."

The footsteps receded. The woman had guided them back into the woods.

Klim lay still until they had gone. Then quietly he got to his feet and struck out for the freedom of the forest beyond. But the voice of that old woman continues to haunt him. Unknown . . . .

EPISODE SIX

THE SNIPER

There was a snug little corner of the hastily constructed dugout where you were safe. Situated in the shelter of a hillock from the South and in the shadow of the earth fortifications from the East you could rely on its being secure from enemy shrapnel and infantry fire. Nothing except a direct hit from a bomb—a thousand to one chance which every soldier dismisses—would find that little place. Friedrich had his eye on it from the start. As soon as it was the turn of his platoon to occupy the dugout he hastily scrambled for it.

His relief was exquisite, hardened soldier though he was. The Russian artillery had been laying down a barrage and the machine guns had been stuttering like a dozen parsons with false teeth.

He slumped back and stretched his legs, dropping his rifle and kit beside him. He rolled a cigarette, grinning at Hans, the storm-trooper, a great sullen fellow with a big mouth and a neurotic laugh who was his pet hate. The two men glared at each other.

"Trust Friedrich to find himself a funk hole."

"Jealous?" said Gottfried, winking at Friedrich. "Cut it out, Hans. You know you wouldn't mind making yourself at home there if you were quick enough."

The rest of the platoon took no notice. They lay stretched out like dead men. They were too tired to put down groundsheets. In less than a minute they were asleep.

For some reason Friedrich was restless that evening. He lay and sighed. He brooded: "Here I am, a doctor of law, a connoisseur of rare wines, a dilettante of the arts, a devotee of Beethoven and Schopenhauer; my greatest pleasure in life was to take part in good conversation over wine with old Prof. Neutstater. It was 'intellectual excitement' that I liked. I was contemptuous of materialism in every form. I even used to shudder at the bad design of a building at one time. Now my one preoccupation is to find myself a bit of grubby ground to park my backside, the height of luxury to know that you can stretch your legs without fear of a bullet. A fat lot of living space this is."

He lay and pondered, then became aware of an acute call of nature. He rose, grumbling under his breath, leaving his rifle and kit to mark his new home.

As soon as he returned he uttered a loud curse. "Here, what's the idea!" He gave the prone body of Hans a shove with his foot. The latter opened an eye and closed it.

"—— off!"

"That's my place, you ——!"

"——!"

Friedrich countered in a similar fashion, his voice growing to a shout.

In a minute the two men, the one a former lawyer, the other an ex-motor dealer, were at each other like a couple of fishwives over—what? A dispute about a desirable residence near the Unter den Linden or a luxury flat near the Wilhelmstrasse? Indeed, they would never have condescend-

:d to become so heated over such a minor matter. No, a ittle strip of worm-ridden soil, a hole in the ground with the ingular desirable feature that it had neither a Southern nor Eastern exposure.

The others woke up.

"Friedrich is right, Hans. Let him have his place. He spotted it first."

"I don't know anything about the matter," said the storm-trooper, his face growing livid.

"He is entitled to it, Hans. Move along," said another.

"I stay where I am."

"You rotten little bastard, move along," shouted Friedrich, white with passion. For months now he had kept his nerve. It had not failed him under the biggest barrage, now suddenly he felt himself at the end of his tether. As the soldier who, hardened to the fate of hundreds of his dead comrades, may weep at the death of a pet dog, he projected all his pent up emotion of fear suddenly over this trifle. This little patch of ground suddenly seemed to represent a cherished haven from the guns and hatred of the Russians.

The others listened in fascinated silence verging on horror to voices that had a touch of hysteria.

"You called it a funk hole, didn't you! Yet you sneak it as soon as my back is turned. You bloody miserable worm! You cowardly crawling hypocrite!" shouted Friedrich.

"Listen to the hysterical old woman! He calls me a coward!"

"You know it's the one safe place in the dugout, you swine!"

The voice of Captain Schuster broke out harshly. "What's the matter with you men? Shut your mouths and go to sleep or I'll crime the lot of you!"

Hans licked his lips in triumph and settled back comfortably.

With rage in his heart Friedrich lay down in Hans' old place.

It was hours before he could sleep that night. Every shell seemed to be suddenly expressly designed for him. He lay and listened as he did during his first night at the front. He quivered at every explosion. He was tormented with suspense at every whistle.

He lay and cursed his luck. The one really safe place . . . tonight of all nights.

He turned and turned unable to sleep. He cursed the Rus-

sian war, cursed the Russian artillery men, seeking and seeking with endless patience their little refuge.

The shells drew closer. With agony in his eyes he turned to the inert snoring form of Hans. If the shells exploded here and there or anywhere Hans would be safe from shrapnel. He could have killed the ugly neurotic lout . . .

At last exhaustion overcame him and he fell into a fitful sleep . . .

He dreamed of Russian soldiers with bayonets playing blind man's buff in the German trenches whilst he and his comrades crouched in every corner.

It was Gottfried who first woke the next morning. He felt in his pocket for a cigarette. He could find no match.

He turned to Hans lying beside him and whispered, "Hey, Hans, got a match?" He repeated louder, "Hey, wake up, Hans. It's nearly seven. We're on in five minutes. Give us a light, will you?"

There was no answer.

Suddenly he recoiled from Hans. For a moment he regarded him with a queer mixture of consternation and fear.

Then brusquely he woke up Friedrich.

"What's up?" said the latter, rousing himself with difficulty.

"Come and look at our friend."

"Which friend? Whom do you mean?"

Silently Gottfried indicated the form of Hans, lying in a curiously awkward attitude in his 'funkhole'.

Friedrich approached with trepidation, the truth dawning on him suddenly.

After he had finished examining him he looked up with horror.

"There's no doubt about it. He's dead. But —"

"But what?" said Gottfried.

"But—how did it happen?"

"Yes . . . How did it happen? You said it was safe, Friedrich . . . You thought it was safe . . . "

"How could they get him *here*?"

"Yes, how could they?"

They examined the long steel sniper bullet with a look that was expressive of the sheer sickness of their hearts.

• • •

A sniper's work is difficult and exacting. He goes out whilst it is still dark, perhaps four or five in the morning

and returns late at night. He has a firing position which may or may not be spotted by the enemy for a whole day. He picks off his prey.

His task is partly to demoralise the enemy, make them fear every tree and shadow.

The hunters themselves are fair game for enemy snipers. Long and terrible duels sometimes go on for hours. Wit and endurance, nervous control are at maximum tension. Every step they take is under observation. Their firing positions, once marked are kept under machine gun and artillery fire. They never shoot at random for fear of giving away their position. They make every bullet tell. That is why they are dreaded.

Occasionally the Germans would deliberately draw their fire. A tin hat would move forward from a dugout. They fire and the tin hat waggles mockingly. The next moment a squall of enemy fire bursts forth and they have to lie absolutely unmoving whilst bullets whistle at the back of their neck.

From before dusk till late at night—eighteen hours in all—to lie absolutely quiet, alone, always vigilant . . .

When you lie like this you begin to find every soft spot in your body. You begin to grow aware of every bone, every muscle. You lie alone, in dead silence, unmoving, hour after hour. You must miss nothing. You must learn to analyse movements ahead of you, learn to distinguish between the feint—the movement that is made to tempt your fire and betray your position—and the blundering movement of the enemy that makes the genuine target.

Then, in complete silence, take the range, focus the telescopic sights of your automatic precision rifle. Now you have your target. A man, the size of a fly, dead in the centre of the bead. You squeeze the trigger. You watch him wriggle like a swapped fly—almost impersonally. Then he ceases to wriggle.

On one sector of the front 150 snipers had destroyed over a thousand Nazis in twenty days.

One of the most famous of these snipers, Nikolai Koval, on trying to return to his base, found that the enemy had made a surprise attack and had cut him off.

He continued to fight in the trees, in the shadows, behind bushes during the days that followed until the enemy were rubbed raw to a frenzy of nervous dread. They offered him 'comfortable and honourable' terms of capitulation, prom-

ised him freedom if he consented to give up his weapons. They bellowed through high-powered megaphones enticing offers of German sausage.

Koval's deadly bullets continued to spit out from the most seemingly innocent shadows until the Germans dared not move out of their dugouts.

One evening they spotted him. A party of ten Germans moved forward in a long line like beaters and drove him back and back to the bank of the river. Escape was out of the question.

The Germans pressed all round him in a circle. They drew closer tightening the ring until they were within a few yards of him.

The German officer in charge had hardly to raise his voice when he offered Koval terms for surrender. "Just put down your weapon and come out with your hands above your head. We won't shoot. You have nothing to fear. Escape is out of the question."

Koval made no answer.

The officer made a move and the others closed in on the sniper.

When they were a couple of yards from him the hand grenade which he had released exploded in his hand, killing six of the Germans and himself.

EPISODE SEVEN

THE NUT

"Curse those terrible black devils of yours! I have travelled through many countries in Europe and wherever I went it was nothing but victory all the way. But these people of yours are a special people, and they have laid on me and my men the eternal stain of shame." This statement by a captured German officer particularly referred to the Soviet marines nicknamed by the Germans "The Black Clouds".

"Sailors fighting on land, make the invaders feel on their own filthy hides the strength, audacity, resourcefulness and skill of the Red sailors," wrote *Pravda*.

There is no particular élite corps in the Soviet armies; to compare an infantry-man with a Cossack is like matching the merits of an orange with a wax candle. The Russians have their Guards units, their crack regiments just as they have their Stakhaanovites in their industries. The corps with a function comparable with the Commando force in this country are the Red Marines. They have a very proud history. During the Civil War they were in the vanguard of the Revolutionary forces, fighting on land under the leadership of Stalin himself. During the present war they fought at Odessa, Sebastopol, Leningrad, and Murmansk. They are specialists of difficult assault tasks. These amphibious troops have stormed shore batteries under cover of night swimming under barbed-wire with knives in their mouths. They are tenacious in defence.

This story is concerned with a unit of marines on a tiny island in the middle of the river Neva, called Orekhovo, which means nut.

It is an ancient grey stone fortress founded in the early fourteenth century. It is the key to the waterway and one of the gates of Schlusselburg. It is to Russia what Malta is to Britain.

When the Germans smashed their way through to the outskirts of Leningrad and reported they could see Russia's other capital through their binoculars, it was easy to overlook the nut. But the Germans found that it was too hard to crack.

They took Schlusselburg by storm. They flung a cordon of steel round Leningrad, but when they tried to force the Neva they were met by the tiny garrison entrenched in their fortress which withstood the might of their armies during a siege which lasted sixteen months. At the end of this time the Marines, who have no real taste for defensive warfare, joined in the relief of Leningrad.

It was a hot autumn day when the siege first began. The marines learned every phase of the weather from that time on. The burning sun, the deadly Siberian wind that stole across the icebound Lake Ladoga, the rushing torrents of Spring. They grew familiar with the moody skies, the multifarious coloured sunsets, purple and gold or steely grey.

They will long remember that familiar skyline, at once desolate and terrible, the pattern of the Neva winding eastwards and southwards, the mighty Lake Ladoga stretching as far as the horizon, the ice road shadowed beneath the ruins of the grey stone walls. And the unforgettable white nights . . .

A man is tested finally in courage by solitude. When the German batteries barked across the icelocked landscape and resounded in the sepulchral white night men must have nerves of steel to retain their sanity.

It did not take long for the Germans to acquaint themselves thoroughly with the layout of the island. A few spotting aircraft told all there was to know in the first few hours of their arrival. They thought they would take Orekhovo in their mighty seven league panzer stride.

They are thorough, the Germans. They prepared everything. From the siege artillery piece to the copper cable of the telephone wire. They had everything ready to take over full possession of the island. The stores and the cables and the travelling bags of the oberlieutenants remained for sixteen months on the river bank like the furniture of a dispossessed tenant.

Their aircraft photographed the island from end to end. They knew every inch. They made a design for its destruction. They divided the island up into sections. It looked very plausible on paper. They would demolish the island in so many hours with so many tons of shells. A pretty piece of arithmetic, a typical military calculation.

Nothing is so remorseless as scientific destruction, 'chequerboard fire'. A piece of land, its people, its homes, its history is degraded to a chequerboard design on a photograph.

They completed their plan, they found their range, they drew up their artillery and they began their bombardment. In a matter of hours the fortress was a smoking ruins, a heap of smashed masonry and twisted steelwork. They calculated nothing could live under the shock of that ferocious bombardment. The fortress was a mangled deathtrap. Then they deluged the rest of the island with fire and steel, rained machine gun and tommy gun bullets from end to end.

But when they made a single move to advance they were met by a murderous crossfire from the island. Somehow the marines shook their heads clear from the roar of the shells echoing in their ears and answered the German guns.

The Nazis next tried to ferret out the Soviet batteries. They welcomed fire, kept up a desultory bombardment whilst their main siege artillery were kept in reserve until the Soviet guns would open up and reveal their positions.

When the gunners learned their game they kept moving their battery which, elusive as a piece of soap in the bath, escaped the ferocious shelling of concentrated siege pieces. Never for longer than an hour or two did the Soviet gunners keep their batteries in a single place. This merciless game of hide and seek would go on sometimes for weeks on end.

The Germans then tried to cut off the Soviet line of supply, endlessly raining fire on the river crossing, but the sombre white nights proved a blessing. Food and stores of ammunition and relief was dispatched under the cover of the winter nights.

There comes a time when men no longer fear the face of death. It becomes overfamiliar and the impact of its presence loses its horror. How else can one explain the cool audacity of the Soviet marines who behaved with such disrespect for the Nazis . . .

The marines used to stun the fish with dynamite which then floated to the surface. Sometimes their crop would float away borne on the strong current towards the bank of the river where the Nazis were established. Rather than let it fall into the hands of the Germans the marines would row out boldly in their rubber boats and snatch it away from under the noses of the Germans. This insolence would infuriate the Germans as much as the Soviet resistance. They would rain more fire on a handful of Russian fishermen than they needed to capture Abbeville. There were times when the Germans, exhausted with beating air, fell sullenly silent. They remained in their dugouts. All was quiet for a long time.

The marines felt they were winning this nerve war. One day the Germans came out of hiding and marines opened fire with concerted power. This stung the Germans into violent retort which was what the marines wanted. It was the turn of the Germans to reveal their gun positions. The Soviet gunners made their calculations and retaliated, wiping out several batteries.

* * *

The sergeant was playing chess with a marine. A gunner was writing a letter and there was a smell of fish frying.

Stepan was fingering a balalaika, rehearsing for the amateur concert. This was a typical scene under bombardment.

The shelling was very heavy that day. Over five hundred shells had screamed overhead that afternoon but Stepan went on strumming his instrument.

There came a prolonged whine. Nobody looked up as it rose and rose to a shrill whistle and then began to scream.

Stepan looked up and shook his head. "No," he said. "It won't do. That string is flat. And I'm afraid to tighten it or it will snap."

The gunner put down his pen and the little group of men listened concernedly to the balalaika. Stepan was a star performer at the concert.

Another shell drew near in its insensate flight. Stepan plucked the string a few times. The shell had a deeper note than the last, the Germans were finding their range. The air quivered, sound became almost tangible, something oppressive. A shrill detonation and the dry shattering crash of falling masonry.

"Well?" said Stepan.

"Yes," said the gunner. "It's flat."

A scout burst excitedly into the room.

"Comrades . . . " he began.

They had never seen him so excited before. His eyes were alight and his face was gleaming with perspiration.

"What is it?"

"All out!"

"But we've just been relieved . . . "

The scout shook a peremptory hand. "It's begun."

Not a word more. The marines seized their rifles. There was a flash of steel as the bayonets, long resting in their sheaths but bright as ever, were eagerly fixed in place.

The marines were ready to join their comrades in the smashing of the German besiegers of Russia's second capital.

COLD STEEL

That the bayonet is outmoded is a view which has been exploded in the Soviet German war. It was supposed at one time that the mass of firepower either side was able to concentrate was alone sufficient to drive back the enemy, but owing to the strength of fortifications, troops who are determined to hold out can be dislodged only by hand to hand fighting.

It is a welcome sign that the Germans have confessed that the bayonet is a notoriously Russian weapon, the use of which is 'savage and typical of the barbarous mentality of the race'. They speak with concern about the 'murderous four-edged Soviet bayonet' as though their own weapons are necessarily of a gentler character. In short it is not the Russian bayonet which is deadly but the Russian bayonet in Russian hands.

It is true also that many decent-minded normal Russians have been driven by the Germans to delight in the use of this weapon which can so eloquently express their hatred for the torture, the slavery and humiliation of millions of their countrymen. To hit at the enemy from long range and from remote control is sometimes not as satisfactory as to see him die at close quarters, to see the invincible superman turn yellow before the bayonet charge is good for the morale and alleviates something of the pain in your heart at the memory of your tortured loved ones and devastated homes.

* * *

A Red Army platoon was facing a German company advancing at full strength. The platoon, led by Lieutenant Krylov had been under murderous artillery and mortar fire for half an hour and the Germans hardly expected anyone to be left alive.

Krylov told his men to remain quiet until the Germans were well within range. When they were within good range the 'dead men' opened concentrated and accurate fire. Practically half the German force was wittled down before

they had advanced another hundred paces. The rest pressed on. The odds were still very high in their favour.

Krylov gave the order, "Fix bayonets," in a dry tone.

The long finely tempered blades flashed as they were clipped in place.

One of the men, a sergeant, had waited long for this opportunity. It is enough to say that his home was in Kiev.

He was a powerful man, but more important still, he was extremely light on his feet, quick and agile. When the Germans saw the bayonets glint above the dugout their footsteps faltered a little. The advantage is always to the man who first draws steel. It has a mesmeric effect at times so that even the hardened tommygunner becomes a rabbit momentarily and with arms as though paralysed loses the precious moment which decides initiative.

The small party of Russians leaped from their trenches in a fury of aggressive passion. The sergeant was amongst the first three.

He had his bayonet poised even as he leaped. In midstride he aimed it at the throat of a German officer who missed him at a range of three yards such was the state of his nerves. The cold steel darted into the throat with a deadly precision and was plucked out in a flash. A German soldier who was flinging himself forward to aid the officer was nimbly avoided and as he plunged past, the sergeant tripped him and swung his rifle butt like a sledge hammer. The soldier lay still with his neck broken.

The Russian turned to meet his next adversary who proved to be a man of a different mettle, a tall yet wiry corporal with small deeply sunken eyes in a narrow skull.

The Russian will never forget those eyes, eyes that darted like snakes behind the ruthless play of cold steel. This thin-lipped Nazi was no mean adept with the long knife. He was quite at home with that sort of fighting, prepared by a long apprenticeship in the back alleys of Hamburg in the service of the Fuehrer where the long dagger, the lead-weighted sacking and the knuckleduster were the instruments of his craft. The two men faced one another. Both had long waited for this moment.

The Nazi began by aiming low, for the bowels. The Russian parried the thrust with a powerful turn of the wrist. Blade clove with blade. The Nazi, a tall herring of a man, had the superior reach. He avoided the counter thrust with

COLD STEEL — HOT COURAGE

a skilful withdrawal calculated to throw the Russian off balance, but the latter had the right foot forward. For a moment they faced each other, waiting for the slightest movement like hawks. The German made a swift insinuating movement for the chest and then dropped his blade low once more.

But the Russian had been watching his eyes. He gave himself away. He anticipated the feinting movement. Deftly sidestepping he lowered his blade to meet the blade of his opponent and swung his rifle butt in a single movement. The Nazi darted back, his rifle crossed above his head like a quarterstaff, protecting his head.

"Not so fast, Russ," he hissed, a pale smile hovering over his perspiring lips.

He recoiled and thrust with that snake-like movement. His bayonet, aimed for the throat, missed by a matter of inches. The sergeant felt the steel for a second as it ripped open his collar with a razor-like slash (he later missed three buttons). As the Russian's guard went up to parry the blow the Nazi jumped in kicking below the right knee.

His foot partially paralysed he could not avoid the next attack, a downward thrust with all the Nazi's strength and weight behind it, a driving lunge that began head high and aimed at the stomach. The rifle in his hands strove to deflect this tremendous drive. He succeeded, by a superhuman effort to parry it partially, his hands trembling with the exertion. The Nazi drew blood. It was a mere flesh wound, just above the groin. The Russian had just time enough to feel a curious perplexity at the touch of the bayonet. ('They talk of cold steel. It's really quite *hot*.')

Now the Nazi was swiftly circling his opponent, intending suddenly to dart in in the opposite direction and drive in under the Russian's guard. The latter watching him, decided to get the signal from his eyes.

The Nazi made as though to attack but the Russian, following those eyes, noted the sightless stare and remained cool and poised, ready for the real attack when it came.

Suddenly it came. The Nazi threw discretion to the winds, jumping in with a deep exhalation of breath, his bayonet whirling. He meant to get inside the other's guard and pinion him between the shoulder blades with a rear attack. His long legs carried him forward at quite an incredible speed.

The sergeant anticipated the attack. He jumped clear.

The Nazi's precipitous move flung him off balance. The Russian merely directed his blade at the Nazi's breast. The other, with all the power of his furious attack, fell spitted on the deadly weapon like a turkey.

Freeing his bayonet to meet any other attack the sergeant found that the Germans were in full retreat.

Seventy of them had been wiped out by Krylov's platoon. The Russians remained in possession of the hill.

EPISODE NINE

BOY

Total war in Russia means a mobilisation of all human resources. The Russians argue that theirs is not a large country. The German-European forces comprising three hundred millions population are about double the man power of the Soviet Union, taking into consideration the territory occupied by the Nazis. In Russia therefore, even children have played their part against the Nazis and with that coolness which the latter have found so inexorable the Russians have even classified their military qualities. "Small children make good scouts. Their keen curiosity and, at times, quite extraordinary powers of observation, their ability to pass unnoticed have rendered their assistance highly useful to the guerrilla espionage service."

This is the story of a small boy aged nine who lived in Stalingrad. His parents had been killed by the Germans and he went to live with his grandmother. He immediately seemed to take over responsibility as master of the household. He put on a man's padded jacket which reached to his feet, he was quite unperturbed by the din of battle, he seemed able to creep about amidst the ruins, the bombs, like a mouse, finding a hole to hide in with an almost reflex movement. The child—his name was Volodia—was practical and intelligent and was more curious than afraid of the gigantic drama unfolding before his eyes.

Yakovlev, a Red Army spotter, was at work spying out the land for his battery amidst the din of the Stalingrad battle. The grey ruins of the obliterated streets, the roar of explosives and the iron impersonal acclamation of the guns made a scene of terror and desolation which only the strongest nerves can withstand in solitude. The spotter perched up on the debris was like a jim-crow alone in the midst of this fiery sea. At last he packed up his instruments feeling the sense of relief of one reprieved. Once spotted he would have had no hope of returning to his battery.

Quietly he slipped down and began to pick his way methodically among the ruins. At the corner of a heap of bricks in a partly demolished building was a grey bundle of rags. The bundle appeared to move before his surprised eyes, and a small childish head poked up inquisitively surveying him with a critical impartiality of the very young. Yakovlev was horrified.

"What are you doing here? You'll get killed."

"Not everybody gets killed, there are always a few left alive," said Volodia, picking some small stones from the toes of his bare feet.

"Well, that's good sense, but anyway let's get out of here." Yakovlev wanted to assume the role of protector but the small boy wasn't having any. His hands disappeared in the caverns of his pockets and he marched along in the most dignified fashion. Yakovlev gave the little lad a handful of rusks and sugar, and was both amused and saddened at the mature way with which the latter put away the sugar for future use, very much like a soldier with his iron rations. The two 'men' discussed the war. Yakovlev learned that the venerable grandmother with her bad temper played a larger role in the boy's life than the Luftwaffe.

The next day, as Yakovlev was returning from the observation point, Volodia turned up out of the ruins and accompanied his friend to the battery. This happened every day until a firm friendship was established. It was not the small gossip or the large views that bound them together so much as human contact under such conditions. It seemed to Yakovlev that danger was reduced and that solitude lost its poignance in the din of battle each time the little fellow appeared.

One afternoon Yakovlev turned up at his observation post, a half ruined house, during the height of a German push. He did not know how his movements were spotted, perhaps

he dislodged a few bricks and made his presence known that way, but quite suddenly he found himself attracting the calculated fury of the German fire. They wanted to stab out the eyes of the battery. Snipers opened fire from vantage points. They were the most deadly because it is impossible to take cover when you don't know from where the bullets are directed. Yakovlev lay on the floor crouched against the wall and shifted his position once more at the foot of the window ledge; no avail. The bullets whined like wasps, found flesh and smashed bone. He turned and turned in his small cage, he could not make his escape: the Germans had swept beyond his observation post and he was surrounded. He was wounded in the arm and shoulder now. He lay on the floor tense, listening to the bullets as they probed and fingered like a blind man acquainting himself with an unfamiliar room. It was only a question of time. Yakovlev wondered whether to light a cigarette and make a quick finish of the business.

Suddenly, a few stones scraped and Volodia poked his head round the corner like a mouse reappearing on its nightly peregrination.

"How the devil did you get here?" whispered Yakovlev.

"You're hurt," said Volodia, "what's happened? Come on, let's get out of here."

"How can I?" said Yakovlev. "The place is surrounded. You beat it. They might not bother about you."

"Come on, uncle, let's go home," said Volodia.

"I'd like to, but they won't let me go. I've done them a few bad turns."

"You come with me," said Volodia, "there's not a stone or a corner I don't know in this district. We'll get through all right."

Yakovlev managed to get to his feet. The child knew his way about with uncanny precision. They made their way circumspectly, boldly hugging the walls in the deepest shadows, crawling along drain-pipes like flies, sometimes running unhesitantly across exposed yards, diving into cellars or clambering over roof tops. They were quickly out of range of the machine guns. Now and then they heard the high-pitched whine of the sniper bullet.

The little boy stopped. "There's going to be a difficult bit now," he said, his eyes shining with excitement. "We've made a détour, we can either continue which will take a long time, or we can sneak under their very noses by a little

alley-way I know. Which is it to be?"

"Listen, sonny, you go ahead. They won't shoot at you. I'll take my chance if you tell me the way."

"Don't be silly, uncle," said Volodia.

"Alright then, let's try your short cut."

They crawled on hands and knees through a narrow alley; they were quiet as cats. A German helmet was silhouetted above the wall for a moment and they froze into the shadows. The head disappeared. They heard German voices and took advantage of this camouflage to race forward at high speed. They were through.

As soon as they got back to the battery Yakovlev had his wounds dressed. He lay on his bed smoking a cigarette. The two men did not exchange a word. Yakovlev could not trust himself to speak. A Red Army man brought soup for both of them.

"Thanks, comrade," said Volodia. When he finished he rose briskly to his feet, thrust his hands in his pockets and nodded to Yakovlev. "So long," he said, then poked his head round the door, "you're not to go out without me in future, I wonder they trust you as far as the end of the street."

EPISODE TEN

No. 25 TRACTOR STREET STALINGRAD

Senior Lieutenant Ponomarev, Guards officer and specialist of close-quarter fighting, called a meeting.

"Comrades," he said. "We've managed to break down enemy resistance over an area of forty fortified points." (By this he meant forty demolished houses in Stalingrad.) "Now we've got to consider wiping out enemy resistance at No. 25, Tractor Street. The position of this four-storied house is in the line of our advance like a stone in a shoe. We can't move with comfort until we've eliminated it. It dominates the entire district and the Nazis have got about ten

batteries guarding it. It is heavily mined and fortified, every step towards the door is under machine-gun fire. A frontal blow is therefore useless. Let us work out an alternative plan."

"May I have permission to investigate?" said a sergeant. "If I had a chance to observe the routine of the enemy, we will know how to deal with them."

Ponomarev agreed to the suggestion.

In the evening the sergeant set out under cover of heavy gun-fire and settled in a ruined building with field-glasses, compass, stop-watch and all other necessary instruments to chart enemy movements. He stayed there twenty-four hours and came back with a rather smug look.

"Well?" said the lieutenant. "How did the one-man intelligence service get on? I suppose the position is a real hedgehog?"

"Even hedgehogs must sleep sometimes, Comrade Lieutenant. The whole place is bristling with every sort of gun and automatic weapon. But there are three minutes of the day when part of the garrison leaves the building by communication corridors and the first floor is left with a bare skeleton staff. So the hedgehog has an Achilles heel," said the sergeant who was quite as fearless in mixing his metaphors as he was in other ways.

"What sort of force is there on the first floor?"

"Large enough, but we want a small group for the job. We don't want to give ourselves away."

Ponomarev knew how to take advantage of the situation. He picked his men for the task. They were all picked troops of the special calibre that is required for Stalingrad fighting; experts at hand-to-hand combat, resourceful, and capable of lightning decisions as there is nothing static about this type of warfare. Highly intelligent men with a keen awareness of the importance of their task. They knew that this cornerstone of German strength was holding up the advance of a thousand men. They aimed to winkle out the German force with surgical precision. At dawn they were ready to advance. Armed with grenades, automatic rifles, long knives, equipped with iron rations, first-aid kit, signalling apparatus the break-through unit complete.

Ponomarev crawled on ahead hiding behind collapsed walls and mounds of smashed masonry. There was not a sound from the building.

He jerked up his thumb and the others followed in ones

and twos. They darted forward. Barbed wire was cut systematically. A lane was made for the men to advance.

In the dead quiet the sound of the trenching tool that clattered to the ground was like an explosion.

The Germans heard. Lights blazed up. Sirens screamed and lead poured from a hundred firing points.

Ponomarev signalled the sergeant who understood the pre-arranged code.

"Retreat," said Ponomarev.

Sergeant Bogomolov and twelve others, however, 'disobeyed' the order, unknown to the Germans. Whilst the mass of men fell back the thirteen hid in the bushes near the building.

Silence.

The Germans had not long settled down to rest when the shattering roar of grenades made them jump to their feet electrified. Their hostile neighbours had blown in the wall and were pouring in, their tommy-guns roaring.

Ponomarev, hearing the roar of strife, led his men back to reinforce the break-through party.

The Germans were making for cover. The Russians burst open the doors and hurled in a handful of grenades before flinging themselves forward on their faces. The skin on their skulls seemed to contract with the violence of the explosion. There were moans and outcries from the Germans. A door burst open from across the corridor and an automatic rifle protruded its ugly snout for a moment, spitting lead. The Guardsman rolled clear, round the corner. One of them hugging the wall, sneaked up and fell with a cat-like quiet on the German, closing in on him from behind the door and grappling with him. He got his neck in an arm-hold with the thumb of his right hand pressing on the nerve of his wrist and forcing him to drop his weapon. Both men made a wild attempt to seize the automatic rifle. The Guardsman quietened his opponent with a short-arm blow which travelled a bare six inches and landed just under the heart. From across the corridor he heard someone cry "Duck!" and before he had touched the ground a grenade had landed a few yards beyond him, catching a party of Germans in mid-stride. The floor quivered under him. The walls were stained with red after the explosion.

Ponomarev and the others now pushed into room after room at lightning speed. They sprayed the very shadows with lead as they burst through doorways.

Then they turned into the corridor again. Only the sound of movements on the upper floor.

"All clear, Comrade Lieutenant."

"All clear, Comrade Lieutenant," said another Guardsman, poking his head out from a doorway. The men quickly collected round the Lieutenant. "All clear on this floor."

One of the Guardsmen leaned against the wall, breathing deeply and turned rather pale. Another lit a cigarette. They were all silent. The Guardsman who was leaning against the wall slowly slithered to the floor without a sound. They didn't notice it at first. He was so quiet.

"I am all right. It was just a kick on the knee."

One of them attended to him. Two collected the booty, which included a regimental mortar, heavy machine-guns, automatics and rifles.

Ponomarev leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette, whilst the others crowded round him. "It's a queer situation," he said. The Guardsmen listened to the silence. A queer situation indeed. Outside the slender walls hundreds of guns both German and Russian were ranged, their fury in leash, at hair-trigger tension, impotent. Thousands of men were ranged up ready to go into action, a fantastic silence having suddenly descended on the battle-field.

"It's up to us," said the Lieutenant. "We've got to give our lodgers upstairs notice to quit. The side that has the sharper wits and the greater endurance will win. They've got in bigger stocks of ammunition and larger numbers, of course, but mass doesn't count so much in this sort of fighting. A knowledge of topography, quick thinking, boldness, the ability to climb a drain-pipe for instance, can be a greater help than artillery." The Guardsmen seemed to feel a thousand pairs of eyes on them. One of them shuddered slightly.

"Now," said Ponomarev. "We mustn't give them another moment to consolidate. This is a job for individual men."

The staircase was covered with a dozen machine-gunners. The leading Guardsman took the plunge. He ran up three stairs before he collapsed with bullet wounds. The second broke through to the fifth step, the third got half-way up and hurled a grenade. Two others raced up to take advantage of the situation. They managed to get within three steps of the second floor landing before they rolled over the sides of the staircase.

"Again," muttered Ponomarev.

Again and again and again. Hour followed hour as the Guardsmen played this fantastic game with the Nazi marksmen.

The staircase was strewn with Russian and German dead, the night air was thick with vile, blinding smoke. Coughing and bleeding the Russians grimly pressed on. Four scaled the side of the staircase. Five rushed the stairs. This concerted attack divided the Nazi fire. Two men dropped from the sides of the staircase limply. Two others reached the second floor landing and fought in terrific hand-to-hand combat to hold the bridgehead. The Nazis fired and hit their own men. Pressing another three Nazis back with their tommy-guns the Russians threw up a flesh and blood barrier whilst reinforcements rushed the stairs.

The butt of an automatic cracked down on the head of the leading Nazi. The Guardsmen moved into action, hurled grenades which in the compass of four walls were deafening. Plaster and smoke mingled with shrapnel. The Germans turned to run and the Russians pursued firing from the hip. In a few minutes the entire floor was eliminated.

One of the Guardsmen shouted out in triumph, "The place is ours!"

"What do you mean, ours?" said Ponomarev. "This is only the beginning. Get to work, men. Anti-tank gunners and mortar-men stand by for action."

Ponomarev was right. As soon as the Germans had realised that their own men had been dislodged, they unloosed the whole fury of their armour against the building. Dive-bombers and artillery pounded and smashed at the building for twenty minutes. Shells, mines and bombs enveloped and blasted walls and ceilings and floors. The two top floors were completely destroyed. The blast and the flying debris flung up a huge cloud. At the height of the attack the Russians were stupefied by this merciless bludgeoning. Then fifteen tanks came lumbering through the rubble and behind them the Nazi infantry proceeded at a trot.

Ponomarev regrouped his forces. The deafened and semi-paralysed remnants of the Russian force took up positions. A machine-gunner and a mortar-man from a vantage-point on the second floor lay down a curtain of lead behind the tanks, deluging the German infantry with steel. Anti-tank riflemen on the ground floor waited for the tanks to get within point-blank range. They fired powerful volleys and

the shells churned up the armour plating, knocking off gun-turrets, disrupting caterpillar treads. The Germans moved into the very teeth of the Russian bombardment. They found that the very debris which their destruction had wrought about them proved an awkward obstacle. The tanks struggled against an accumulating mass of rubble, slowing down as they compressed the masonry against the wall of the building. One or two made sitting targets being unable to proceed at all.

"Come on, boys. One last volley will do it!" urged Ponomarev. One last volley! It was the fifth time he had used these words. He knew that at the bottom of the dryest well there was always a last drop of water. The Guardsmen moving like automata in their exhaustion fired the fifth last volley, the sixth final last volley. It was the eleventh absolutely last and final volley which smashed the German line. The enemy retreated.

During that day the Germans attacked twice again, but this time the gun-barrels had time to cool and the rested Guardsmen were richer in experience and poorer in qualities of mercy. The attacks broke down pitifully. At six o'clock that day the sporadic firing along the front was drowned by a profound thunder in the distance.

"What's that?" said one of the Guardsmen. "A thunderstorm?" They examined the clear sky.

"No, comrade," said Ponomarev. "It's the Russian counter-offensive."

The Guardsmen lay down beside their guns and stretched their legs luxuriously.

EPISODE ELEVEN

HOPELESS SITUATION

Korolkov, tank commander, with a score of fifteen enemy tanks to his personal credit, has seen some of the bitterest

fighting on the Soviet-German front. The technique of tank fighting is a complex one. Korolkov, needless to say, is a master.

Tanks do the heaviest work at all times, take the brunt of enemy attacks, are subjected to bombardment by the greatest weight of metal, dive bombers, artillery, panzer formations; theirs is the main task of effecting break-through actions against powerful fortifications and entrenched troops. The tankman in his iron machine is shaken over every form of rough ground till every bone in his body aches, suffers an inferno in hot weather, is mercilessly subjected to ear-splitting racket continuously throughout the action. Sweating and stifling, fighting for air, bruised and shaken, his work subjects him to the severest test of stamina and nervous control.

Lieutenant Korolkov fought his most savage engagements on the Stalingrad front. He was given the job of capturing a railway crossing from the enemy. He had eight machines under his command, the Nazis had twenty-two. The engagement lasted eleven hours and the Russians moved in.

What defeated the Nazis?

Korolkov can give no one answer to the question. It was a combination of qualities of fortitude, daring, tactical skill, good marksmanship, iron discipline and physical endurance, in short, an all round test for the soldier.

He gathered the tank commanders together and said, "Well, comrades, there are twenty-two of them and eight of us. How do we set to work?"

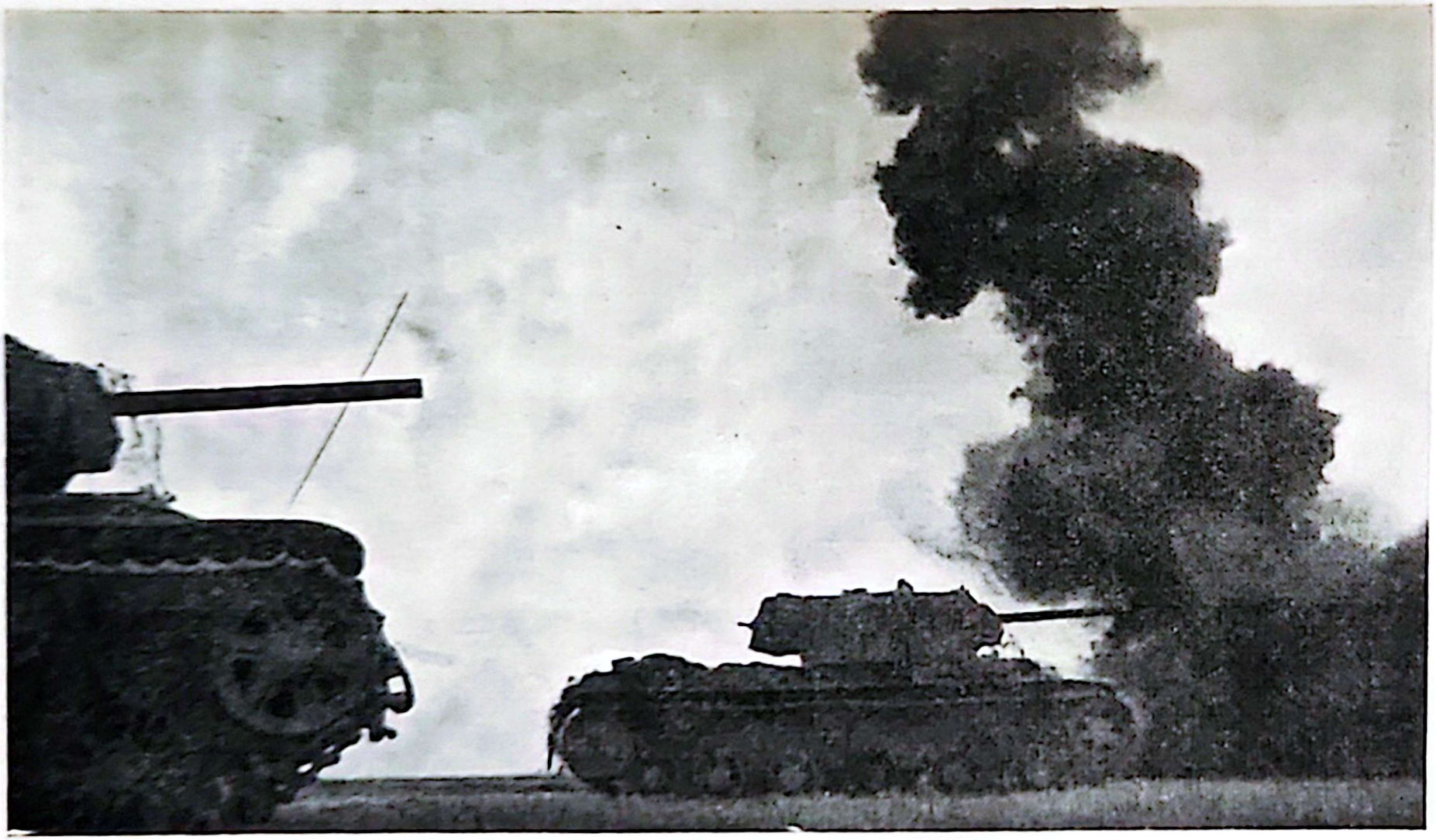
The others were silent a while. On the face of it the proposition seemed impossible. Eight against twenty-two? How were they to be defeated? The Germans had the superior fire-power, they had prepared positions, they had experience, they were flushed with sucess and their morale was high. A hopeless proposition . . . .

Very well, then what was there to do? Give up the engagement? Granted that the war was to continue, how were they to avoid committing suicide?

"It's not only the tanks we have to deal with, comrade commander. They have prepared positions which means that we are faced with anti-tank weapons of every sort, artillery and even dive-bombers."

"Never mind about that for the time being. It's the tanks I'm interested in."

The others simply shook their heads. "We can't elimin-



THERE IS NO HOPELESS SITUATION — THE TANKS ATTACK

ate the artillery and dive-bombers by ignoring them, comrade commander. That's ostrichism."

"Has it ever occurred to you, comrades," said Korolkov, "that we have certain advantages?"

"Advantages? In what way, comrade commander? What advantages?"

They looked at him in baffled astonishment.

"Why," said Korolkov, "if there are only eight of us we have less to defend." He laughed at their perplexity. "You still don't understand. Listen, comrades," he said severely. "I tell you that the Germans are at a disadvantage and what is more I'll prove it to you."

They looked at him in consternation.

He went on, grinning, "There are eight of us. There are twenty-two Germans. Besides that they have anti-tank men, artillery, bombers and what not. Why, comrades, what an embarrassment that is to free movement! What a target all these forces present! Can they infiltrate our positions? Can they fire in any direction they please? Can they attack at full speed? No, no and again no. They're afraid of hurting their own all the time. Don't you see that? Why, they're gravely inferior to us, comrades! We'll make pancakes of them!"

Savelyev, his friend, understood the twinkle in his eye all right.

"Why, we can almost feel sorry for them, eh, comrade commander?" he said.

That was how it was. There are no hopeless situations in the Russian military vocabulary.

Korolkov attacked at dawn. The Soviet machines did not proceed cautiously into battle in the time honoured tactical tradition. There were no accepted duels at long range, sighting at five thousand yards, cautious approaches, hesitations behind cover, gentlemanly withdrawals and honourable salutes. The Russian machines burst into the heart of the enemy camp in a cloud of dust like a grimy whirlwind. They smashed into the German positions at full throttle, their guns blasting all out.

But if the Germans considered the attack was one of desperation they were sadly mistaken. There was a great deal of calculation in this violence.

Every tankman had been carefully allotted a special task, given a section of enemy territory to deal with. Their first job was to infiltrate the positions, overwhelm the outer

anti-tank defences by a rapid surprise assault, then, regardless of the fact that they were cutting themselves off from their own rear, they were to get into the thick of the enemy tank forces with the twofold motive of preventing the German dive-bombers and artillery firing on them from fear of hitting their own tanks and operating at high speed whilst the German machines were still in first gear.

The formation of Soviet machines crashed down on the outer ring of defences in an avalanche of steel. They were overwhelmingly powerful in close formation, presenting on the one hand a mighty armoured front, a forty mile an hour steel battering ram, and were enabled to fire a mass that no local force could withstand. Their caterpillar treads in giant concert churned up an enormous cloud, a veritable smoke screen, like a vast thundercloud, earth-high, with a core of steel and fire.

The German gunners did not know the force opposing them. They were stupified by the din. For all they knew this might be a tank column, a hundred strong, proceeding in this eccentric fashion through over-confidence. Discrimination is most difficult under the circumstances.

Korolkov, at the forefront, saw the leading gun crews flattened like flies beneath this smashing assault, guns crushed and wrecked. A Nazi gunner threw up his hands in front of him, turning to run, his face twisted with horror. He was shouting with terror but you could hear nothing. He seemed voiceless. Suddenly he disappeared. The Russian tank proceeded without even a bump.

In a couple of minutes they had broken right through into the enemy camp. The confusion was indescribable. The Germans were hurrying in all directions, shouting, giving orders, ignoring orders, firing bullets at the tanks which had as much effect on them as orange pips. The German tanks hardly had time to start up. Korolkov's men fanned out and closed on either side of the Nazis, wheeling at a great pace, circling the Nazi machines and firing at the same time. Korolkov fired and watched a cruiser tank groan to a standstill before it could start up.

Now at last the Germans were ready for them. They had lost four machines to nil in the first three minutes and the time for surprises was past. They were badly shaken however and could not understand that they still had overwhelming superiority in numbers.

Korolkov ran abreast of a heavy German tank, closed in

on his rear by pivoting rapidly and fired point blank at the caterpillar treads. They whirled off like a thrashing iron snake. The tank stopped. Korolkov pounded him to pieces at point blank range till the powerful German machine was a mangled steel cage, blazing like tinder.

He turned to meet the fire of another Nazi. They met like steel-clad chargers. There was something tremendously dynamic in this clash, the meeting of modern monsters that seemed to echo the age of the brontosaurus.

Korolkov was badly hit by direct fire.

He jumped out of his tank and continued to direct the battle by signals.

The German bombers dived overhead, sometimes bombarded and sometimes passed on their way baffled by the confusion.

The initial attack had proved too much for the Germans. They had lost a large number of machines so rapidly that they naturally exaggerated the might of their foe and the numbers ranged opposite them out of all proportion. Fear has big eyes, as the Russians say.

The Russians seized the opportunity to deploy and find cover. They kept up a fire on the Nazis scuttling for safety.

The second stage of the battle was far less furious. It was a time for deployment, for cautious approaches, for sudden bold attacks by individual machines. A light machine ran out of hiding at a great rate and was pursued by three heavy German machines who fell into a neat little ambush. It took three hours to wipe out the next four machines.

The mighty ebb and flow of battle proceeded after that hour by hour.

The Germans and the Russians were now firing from concealed positions. As soon as they fired they moved away rapidly to another concealed position, their gun-flashes having revealed the former one.

Finally Korolkov ordered four of his machines to keep up an intense barrage whilst the rest deployed in silence to catch the enemy in the rear. This attack too produced good results.

The Germans suddenly decided they had had enough. It was more than their nerves could stand. The line faltered and broke.

The position was occupied.

THE SPIDER

Antoshkin lay on his back in the confined space of the observation post, smoking a cigarette. He was watching the others at work. Not knowing when he would be called upon on the next job, he was taking it easy whilst he could.

He could see the battlefield clearly, hear the noise of mortar and machine-gun fire, the drone of aircraft flying low.

"Well, Antoshkin," said a comrade who had been staring for some time through his binoculars, "are you quite comfortable?"

"Quite, thank you."

"Would you care to borrow my field glasses? A very interesting view, I must say. Very magnificent. Like a Wagnerian back-cloth. Brought up to date as one might say."

"No, thank you. I am familiar with the view."

The other looked up a moment. "Here's a grand sight, comrade. One of our fighters has just broken up a formation of Junkers. Ahhh! There he goes, power-diving right on the tail of that Prussian officer and gentleman. How wonderful he must feel up there in the sky. Now, *now*. Cannon-fire right in the bomb-rack. A most devastating blow in the balkans, Antoshkin. Our Seigfried is knocked out of the sky."

"It must be very nice for everyone to see you do that. Modern gladiators is what they call them, isn't it?"

"I believe so, Antoshkin, I believe so."

There was silence whilst the spotter made his report to the battery.

The sergeant said, "When you've quite finished with those binoculars, I'd like to have another look at that machine-gun post. They're shifting it again."

"No, they're not. Don't get jumpy."

But he let him have the binoculars. "Ah, as I thought. They've moved them forward. Get in touch with the artil-

lery right away, Sergei."

Sergei began to signal the artillery.

"What a job," said Sergei as he finished. "It's like working in a post office. And they told me I'd see action when I joined the army."

"Look out! Oh, damn, you've upset it now."

Antoshkin had cried out sharply as Sergei moved his chair suddenly.

"Upset what?"

"The spider's web. I've been watching it the last ten minutes. With pathetic ignorance it begins to spin a web between the chair and table leg. Three times already you've broken the web. Three times it began to spin afresh. What industry! I feel almost sorry for it."

"Your concern is almost morbid, Antoshkin. Why bother with an insect that is only fit to be exterminated." He was examining the battlefield through his glasses again.

Suddenly he broke off. "Look—there's a lot of new neighbours just moved in to that house opposite. We must leave a visiting card."

Once again he began that rapid signalling to the artillery. Two minutes later they heard the shells screaming. Watching the effect through his binoculars Sergei maintained contact with the artillery, guiding them with remorseless precision nearer and nearer the objective.

Suddenly he stopped and raised his head with a jerk. He shot a glance at Antoshkin. They regarded each other with the dour humour of those listening to a familiar anecdote.

"Over to me?" said Antoshkin.

"Over to you, comrade."

"Right."

Antoshkin crept out of the observation post and forward over the scarred battleground. The machine-guns began to roar furiously. The viperish whine of the bullets sounded near. Little puffs of dirt shot up a few inches from his nose where he lay. He shuffled forward with incredible rapidity, dug his hands in the earth. Here? No. He moved forward with that ungainly yet surprisingly rapid movement once more. Once again he felt in the soil.

Ah! There it was. He examined the break in the cable. It took him a few seconds to repair it. He put his tools back in his capacious side pocket and scurried back on knees and elbows to the observation dug-out.

PORTRAIT OF A GUARDSMAN — SEN. LT. MICKHAILCHENKO,
PROMOTED FOR SKILFUL FIGHTING

"Okay?"

"Everything okay now. Just tested it."

Antoshkin sank back on the floor whilst Sergei continued to tap out his message.

"You're smoking too much, comrade," said Sergei a little later. "Here—have a look! A bull's eye. The artillery has made a clean sweep of those new neighbours of ours."

Antoshkin examined the building through the binoculars.

"For the time being, anyway."

Both men took it easy for a while.

"What do you make of this, Sergei?" said Antoshkin. He handed the binoculars to the expert who puzzled over the scene a moment. "All sorts of activities. I don't quite see what they're up to. Maybe light field artillery."

"Moving light artillery up to the third floor of a building?"

"It's been known to happen before in Stalingrad, my friend. You'll find them camouflaging anti-aircraft in the chimneys next. I shouldn't be in the least surprised."

He turned to his signalling instrument.

After a minute or two he stopped with a weary sigh and looked at his friend. Antoshkin regarded him with a slight mirthless smile.

"Again?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Well, it gives me a chance to stretch my legs."

This time the Germans were waiting for him. They were infuriated by his persistence. It seemed devilish. Would nothing convince these lunatics that the situation was hopeless, that they could smash that slender link in a matter of minutes?

They opened up mortar fire. The soft bark of guns, the hollow explosions—huge mounds of dirt shot up in fountains around him. He lay still, hugging the earth. He could advance only with the greatest difficulty this time, a few inches and then stop, then move to the left then to the right to confuse their aim. The fire searched, and earth and shrapnel showered about him. Then they pinned him to the ground by overshooting his position and cutting his retreat off with machine-gun fire.

Antoshkin took matters calmly. He lay and waited a moment. He tried to think of something. In his hand were a pair of pliers, the main tools of his craft.

He thought, "Well, it certainly isn't like one of those

boys up in the sky. A pair of pliers aren't a thousand horse-power aircraft to turn somersaults with. What a lousy job. Still . . . " He suddenly rolled over rapidly into a shell hole and lay still.

Nobody would spare that little grey figure crawling through the dirt on his stomach a glance through their binoculars when they could see Siegfried in mighty conflict with a fighter pilot. Antoshkin lay in his hole and pretended to be dead. The firing died down. Inch by inch he edged out of the shell-hole, crawled forward a few yards and disappeared into another shell-hole. He found the slender cable, tested it. With infinite patience he twisted the threads together again. He resumed his tortuous journey back to the observation post.

* * *

It was evening on the Russian battlefield. The observation post, the eyes of the artillery, was still clear and vigilant. Deployment of troops, change of enemy disposition of every description was reported without a hitch. It was evening and they had been on the job for nine hours. The Russian battery had knocked out eight strong-points, five enemy tanks, destroyed over a hundred infantry with shrapnel.

Antoshkin was making his twenty-fourth expedition to repair the communication cable.

It was evening and the sun was giving the last touches of grandeur to the scene. The ruins of Stalingrad were lit up with a soft radiance like some ancient lost city rich in legendary strife. The moment before the sun sets is always a little breathless, nostalgic, and hushed as though the most hardened murderer has found a moment to commune with his conscience.

As Antoshkin crept out of the dugout for the twenty-fourth time, the quiet was shattered by the most bitter fury of fire. The Germans gave him everything they had. Artillery, mortars, machine-guns, even a Junkers dive-bomber went into action. With rage and fear complicated by a reluctant admiration they sought to stab out the eyes of the artillery, to blow to smithereens that insect-like figure patiently, tirelessly preserving the slender link between the eye and the mighty iron fist.

The twenty-fourth time! It is the genius of man to adapt himself even to the industry and tactics of the spider. Antoshkin moved mechanically forward. He had lost the

fear of death almost entirely within the space of these nine hours. There is a merciful fuse-wire which prevents human beings from enduring beyond certain limits the emotional crises of pain and fear. Antoshkin was no longer aware of any emotion. He was merely tired.

He had run through the entire gamut, aggressiveness, audacity, suspense, terror, the quiet calculation with "the last enemy", death, where the two were like card-players reckoning odds against the other in a game of chance and bluff. Now he was merely exhausted and a little bored. He moved into the shell-hole at the sound of the bullets with the mechanical reaction of a frog contracting its legs under the vivisectionist's knife.

* * *

"O.K.?"

"O.K.," said Sergei.

It was all quiet now. The two men relaxed.

"Smoke?"

They were silent awhile. At last, Sergei gingerly got out of his chair in order not to disturb the spider.

Antoshkin nodded in the direction of the chair. "He's been busy."

"Yes. You know, I never before realised what a wonderful engineering job that is. So slender and yet so strong. Yet it is a commonplace of nature, a mere commonplace of the struggle between the hunter and the prey."

"Yes," said Antoshkin. "A mere commonplace of war."

EPIOSDE THIRTEEN

COMRADE OLGA

The factory manager looked hard at this young girl who sat opposite him and said, "What is your name, comrade?"

"Kovaleva. Olga Kovaleva."

"And you want to be a steel smelter?"

"Yes."

"You realise the sort of work it is, do you?"

"Oh, yes, comrade."

"You have to work before open furnaces at a heat that many a strong man finds overpowering. It is gruelling and dangerous work. You still want to do it?"

"Yes."

The manager smiled. "Well, one can try, anyway. But tell me . . . I am personally interested why a young girl should choose such a vocation when there are far less arduous tasks."

The girl returned his smile. "Well . . . it's difficult to say . . . " She hesitated and flushed.

"It's not the bonus, is it?"

"No. I'm not particularly interested in a higher wage rate. It's simply that I want to prove that we women can do the job."

The factory manager rose. "All right. We'll see how you get on, comrade."

He smiled as she left. These enthusiastic youngsters! Wait until they've had a chance to find out what a man's work really was like. The manager pictured the scene in a smelting works, the stifling heat, the blizzards of sparks driving like wasps, the mighty din of the hammers resounding in the iron vaults, beating white-hot metal into shape. It required iron fortitude. Oh, well, let her try. Her ardour would soon cool down.

* * *

This little scene took place in the thirties. In the year 1942 much had changed, but not the spirit of the women of Stalingrad.

Olga Kovaleva had not found the job easy at first by any means. During the first week she would go home in the evenings, ready to drop into bed without supper, such was her exhaustion. Indeed she was even too tired to weep with her misery. The second week she recovered sufficiently to wish she had never taken it on. Only the amused smile of the factory manager, the superior way he said, " . . . many a strong man finds it overpowering," kept her going. The third week she decided to throw it up, after all. The fourth week she decided five times in as many days to throw it up. Five times she called at the manager's office and five

times she paused, her hand poised ready to knock at the door . . . and did not knock.

But years later she was still at work before the furnace.

One evening in late October she was just finishing her shift when the sirens went for the fourth time that day.

She took no notice at first. Soon the bombers were overhead, hundreds of them flying in wide formations. The throb of the engines as they dived low was like a drill buzzing round the nerve of a decaying tooth. A thousand bomber raid again. Stalingrad had a thousand bomber raid nightly.

The effect of the first bombardment was stupefying. You got used to it in a little while. You told yourself that at least three quarters of the noise was the anti-aircraft and tried to take comfort from that.

But the mighty walls of the giant factory trembled like a tent in a hurricane. The two ton bombs thundered like express trains bearing down on you. Thousands of firebombs began to rain down, the incendiaries rattling on the roof like hail, the oil bombs roaring. Soon it was light as day. Outside it was like hell, giant buildings stricken down with one direct blow or buckling under slowly as though collapsing at the knees with a crash of falling masonry, a sound that was indescribably poignant. The weird scream of the bombs was almost continuous. Like souls in torment they wailed their sepulchral song throughout the night, succeeded by cataclysmic uproars. Fires roared like an organ note. Sheets of flame, higher than the tallest building leaped up. When they leaped from building to building, fires wrestled in a fury of possession and devoured stone and steel like rats grinding corn in their powerful jaws.

As Olga made her preparations to leave she heard a commotion. A small group of workers was talking excitedly with the foreman.

"What is it?" she asked, elbowing her way to the front in her eagerness. This was how one received vital news those days.

"Something that concerns us, Olga," said the foreman. "We've just received a whole consignment of damaged tanks and guns to repair. Priority A.1. for the Stalingrad front."

Olga was about to take off her heavy fireproof clothes. She hesitated.

"I'm staying on for another shift."

"No, comrade. You've done enough. Besides—" The foreman jerked his head up. "You can hear what's going

on. To the shelter with you. This is the front line."

"To the shelter, eh? Because I happen to be a woman?"

"Don't be absurd, Olga. It's not your shift. Off with you. I don't want to hear any more nonsense."

She ignored him.

"Anyone else ready to do another shift?"

The others nodded silently.

As she watched the white-hot metal boil like milk in the furnace that night she felt a hand on her elbow. It was the foreman.

"I'm busy."

"No, no. Come over here, Olga. I want you to meet someone."

Reluctantly she let someone take over whilst she went to a corner of the shop where a young Red Army officer was standing.

"I want you to meet the tank commander whose machines you've helped to repair."

"I want to thank you. I wanted to see for myself the sort of people who put our tanks back on the job."

"Oh, there's nothing interesting about us. We're just ordinary people."

"Maybe that's what makes it interesting," said the tank officer with a smile. "But I want you to meet some of the others."

He introduced her to a gunnery crew who were waiting to pick up their repaired weapons and depart for the front. They, too, considered themselves ordinary people, not in the least interesting.

"Well, Comrade Kovaleva, you've certainly fixed our guns very nicely. Maybe you'll hear them tonight."

She looked a trifle concerned. "As near as that?"

"I'm afraid so. The front has moved to Pushkin Street just round the corner."

"I used to do my shopping there."

Olga and the gunners regarded each other without speaking.

"And you'll do your shopping there again one day," said the gunner with decision.

She went to see them off. In the vast yard the thunder of the foundries was drowned by the roars of the explosions. The door of a workshop opened and a tank rumbled out, a tank that had been hastily repaired 'whilst you wait'. There was something familiar about the man sitting beside

the driver. Suddenly she recognised one of the workers, a Stakhanovite.

"Hallo, Vassily, where are you off to?"

"They're a bit short-handed out there so when I finished repairing the tank I hopped in beside the driver. We're off to Pushkin Street."

Olga turned with fierce decision to one of the gunners. "Listen, comrade, I've studied military science in evening classes. Let me come along and handle one of those guns."

"Military science in evening classes. That's most instructive, I'm sure, comrade."

"Be serious. Let me come with you."

"Out of the question. We can't take—"

"Well, go on. What were you going to say? You can't take women, eh? Tell me this, comrade . . . Who repaired your gun?"

"You did."

"If I'm good enough to put it right, who says I'm not good enough to handle it?"

The crushing logic upset the sergeant. "Come on, comrades, we're all in this together." Without any more ado she jumped up on the gun carrier and they set off for Pushkin Street.

They drove along in silence. The streets were vividly illuminated with the innumerable fires. The whole horizon had deepened from brick red to scarlet. A warehouse filled with candles and rope caught alight and flowered into yellow fire, whirling blazing balls of congealed fat in every direction.

One of the crew lit a cigarette.

"Put that light out," said the sergeant.

When they had finished laughing at the sergeant's joke they had already arrived at Pushkin Street.

"Well here we are, Comrade Kovaleva. The street of the gentle poet, Pushkin. How the memory of those verses my sister used to read to me haunts me here in this street. Can you not sense the tender beauty of the poet's soul in this atmosphere, eh?"

The voice of the sergeant was grim, almost vicious.

Quickly they got the gun into position. "Let's see what sort of job you've made of that repair work."

They tested the gun to the cost of a platoon of German tommy-gunners scuttling in the shadow of a building across the road.

"Yes, she'll do." The gunner laid his hand on her affectionately. As Olga turned to see what help she could be the sergeant said, "Help with the loading. Pass the shell on. We're making a human chain, you see. Everyone depends on everyone else. That's the quickest way and the best."

"Yes," said Olga, "it is."

* * *

She had achieved her goal, then. The circle was completed. It was bitter but it was triumphant. She had proved the rights of women to complete equality. After Stalingrad no one would ever again claim any disparity between man and woman.

She had helped to forge the steel for the gun she was now helping to use against the enemy, Nazism, whose despicable code confined women to the kitchen and the kindergarten.

Olga Kovaleva died in the defence of her home in Stalingrad but before she died she struck a telling blow for the final liberation of women.

'Not for one moment must we forget . . .'

Not for one moment, Mr. Churchill told the House of Commons, must we forget the tremendous burden that Russia is bearing, and the debt that we owe to her. Already much has been done through the Red Cross by the people of Britain to relieve Russia's suffering. 6,300 tons of medical and surgical supplies, 400,000 woollen garments and 500,000 blankets have been sent by Mrs. Churchill's 'Aid to Russia' Fund. But more, far more, is needed. A huge consignment of surgical instruments, drugs and clothing is being assembled to meet Russia's latest needs.

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